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# Employment, Politics and Working-Class Women in North East England, c. 1790-1914

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Jonathan William Mood



Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department  
of History, University of Durham, 2006

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- 3 MAY 2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

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### **EMPLOYMENT, POLITICS AND WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND, C. 1790-1914**

**JONATHAN WILLIAM MOOD**

This thesis explores the issue of the economic and political agency of working-class women in North East England for the period c.1790-1914. In contrast to the national average, the North East was populated by more men than women in this period, whilst the dominance of industrial trades such as coal, shipbuilding, iron and steel, and engineering resulted in the lowest female employment rates in the country, as well as the highest marriage rates and the youngest average age at marriage. These trends are investigated in detail and would suggest that if anywhere women were to be powerless it was here. Yet, as this thesis shows, women in the North East were active constituents of local culture and politics, often through different means, and with alternative motives than has been claimed for localities where there existed high rates of female employment. The impact of structural changes in the political system during the latter nineteenth century is assessed and it is suggested that whilst many political organisations of this period involved a small number of working-class women in contemporary political debate they were generally unsuccessful at appealing directly on political issues of substance; the formal politics of this period did not always coincide with the politicisation of working-class men and women. This thesis aims to strike a balance between typical and atypical experiences by exploring the social climate of a large region rather than focus specifically upon potentially unrepresentative localities.



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I am thankful for the assistance, support and friendship of too many people to name individually, but special mention should be given to Helen Berry for her kindness in reading early drafts of my work and providing invaluable encouragement.

I am particularly indebted to the advice and guidance of my supervisors, David Craig and Andrzej Olechnowicz. I would have been lost without their shrewd criticism, insightful comments, careful readings and ongoing support.

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<sup>1</sup> Map 1.3 is reproduced with kind permission. Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'The Occupational Structure of England 1750-1871. Introduction and Preliminary Conclusions', unpublished preliminary report of ESRC Funded Project.

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## MAP 1.1

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### MAP OF ENGLAND WITH NORTHUMBERLAND AND DURHAM HIGHLIGHTED

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## MAP 1.2

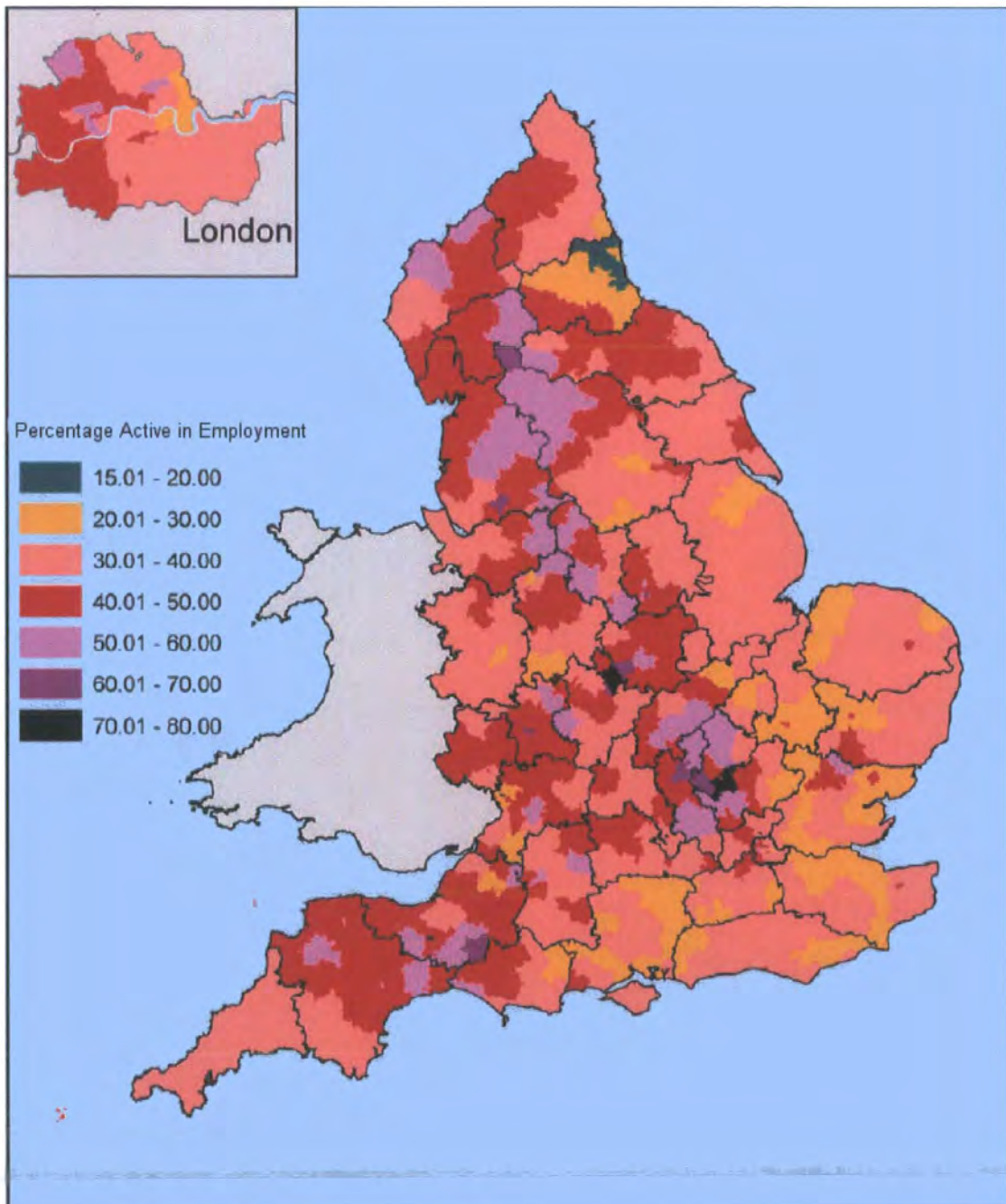
### MAP OF NORTHUMBERLAND AND DURHAM SHOWING PRINCIPAL TOWNS AND VILLAGES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT





### MAP 1.3

## PERCENTAGE OF ADULT FEMALES IN REGULAR EMPLOYMENT, 1851



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## INTRODUCTION

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Around town at night and saw nothing but wretchedness and misery in the poorer districts. The saying 'one half of the world does not know how the other half live', is very true, and people who would like to be made aware of this must just about midnight walk around the notorious and dirty quarters of our city. Dirty and ragged females are seen standing in motley groups. Filthy and obscene language is the rule, and not the exception. Lazy and ill looking creatures – the worst possible type of mankind – are loafing about or indulging in their greatest delight and pastime – a quarrel and fight. The sights are too disgusting and I got away from the foul atmosphere of the place, and was quite relieved by the pure midnight air of the suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

This private diary entry of William Dunn, a young middle-class Newcastle man, is a fairly typical piece of observation and judgement upon the lives of working-class men and women in the Victorian era. If contemporaries were often quick to judge working-class lifestyles, households, relationships and entertainments, historians have been keen to recover the manner through which these men and women lived and experienced their surroundings. The work of Ellen Ross and Anna Davin has done much to expand our understanding of the daily lives of the female labouring poor on their streets and in their

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<sup>1</sup> Tyne and Wear Archives (Hereafter TWAS), DX 225/1, Diary of William Dunn, 27 July 1887.





homes,<sup>2</sup> whilst there have been numerous excellent surveys of working-class political movements and the activities of committed individuals.<sup>3</sup> The field of nineteenth-century gender history is firmly established, boasting a varied and intricate historiography; this is reflected in the choice to integrate historiographical discussion within the five chapters of this thesis, rather than examine it in a separate chapter. Despite such a wealth of research, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge.

Although historians have readily recognised the importance of regional differences, this is often offered as a proviso to their conclusions, which have been drawn from evidence relating to localities within a particular region – typically areas within the North West, Yorkshire, the Midlands and London – which are then made to stand as representative of England as a whole. Alternatively, rather than stressing the manner in which the uneven impact of industrial change affected women in certain localities, evidence has been used from England as a whole to give a general, and often too broad, picture. Economic change was not uniform across England during the eighteenth century and it now seems impossible to trace with any accuracy or confidence the transition of the site of employment from the home to the workplace. Many of the industries that flourished in different areas of England long before the nineteenth century were those

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 1993); Ellen Ross, "'Fierce Questions and Taunts': Married Life in Working Class London, 1870-1914", in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis – London: Histories and Representations Since 1800* (London, 1989), pp. 219-44; Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War One', *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (1983), pp. 4-27; Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> There are too many to list in full here, but see for example, Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches. Gender and the Making of the British Working Classes* (London, 1995); Christine Collette, *For Labour and For Women. The Women's Labour League, 1906-1918* (Manchester, 1989); Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1993); Pat Hudson and W.R. Lee (eds.), *Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective* (Manchester, 1990); Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow. Women Workers at the Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1984); and, Jane Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different. Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987). This is, of course, in addition to the numerous studies focused specifically upon working class men.

that could not be performed as a family enterprise within the household: coal mining, ship building, paper and glass making. Whilst historians are increasingly wary of the explanatory power of any perceived shift in the location of work from inside to outside the home, there remains an implicit, if not explicit, connection in historical argument between female employment and female politicisation.<sup>4</sup> In many cases this is accurate, but work was not a prerequisite to political interest and it is debatable how applicable such research is to the experiences of working-class women elsewhere in England. Moreover, by concentrating on the forms of politicisation that developed amongst working-class females in areas of high employment, more general forms of politicisation can be missed, or identified and wrongly ascribed as being a feature of those areas. Whilst there remains much debate over the accuracy and applicability of the occupational census, it remains the most useful record of regular female employment in this period.<sup>5</sup> As Map 1.3 shows, the areas where high female employment was recorded were not insignificant, but were also isolated in a strip down the west coast of England. There remained large areas of the country with only modest levels of female employment, whilst the North East – and especially Durham – represents some of the lowest rates.

There have been few in-depth historical examinations of areas where there were extremely limited employment opportunities available for women. This may be because of the assumption that economic change in this period was generally skewed to favour men and that such analysis is not needed. It may also be the case that examining a region which anticipated few of the cultural and social changes that occurred during the

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<sup>4</sup> Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1978). See also Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke, 2000); and, Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

twentieth century is unappealing. The North East is here defined as the old counties of Northumberland and Durham, as well as the tip of North Yorkshire; a region bound geographically east and west, by sea and hills, and north and south by the more fluid demarcations of country and county. As a region, the North East has tended to be neglected in recent accounts of women in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> It has been thought of as a 'masculine', industrial region; coal mining, ship building, engineering, and iron manufacturing loom large in historical accounts. There was no obvious or prominent employment for women in this period. The success of textile manufacturers further south was at the expense of fledgling industries at Stockton, Barnard Castle, and Darlington. There were few notable figures in the suffrage movement resident in the region and nothing to compare to the activities of the Langham Place group. The North East was unusual in that the sex-ratio in this region favoured men for much of the period, whilst coupled with the low levels of female employment there were high rates of marriage, often at a very early age. It would seem an unappealing region to investigate if one were to wish to describe the possibilities of female agency. There is an almost irresistible urge to study those areas and persons where great incidents occurred, where the people had the greatest amount to say and who seemed in their actions most to reflect later developments. Yet, if we were only to examine those pioneering women who pushed on the boundaries of acceptable female activity we would run the risk of missing the more mundane and less well recorded activities that were undertaken by women. This study examines the position of women who by the structure of the economy and population in this region would seem to have little hope of exerting political agency.

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<sup>6</sup> Two exceptions are, Judy Gielgud, 'Nineteenth Century Farm Women in Northumberland and Cumbria: The Neglected Workforce', Ph.D. thesis (University of Sussex, 1992); and, Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms. Women, Work and Poverty in Nineteenth Century Northumberland* (Suffolk, 1999).

Given the tremendous differences that occurred between regions in the patterns of economic and population change it is important to establish the developments in the North East; Chapter One does this. Chapter Two investigates the comparatively low levels of female employment that were evident in this region. Although the occupational census is the largest single source available to historians investigating employment in the nineteenth century, its usefulness has been debated. Without denying that this data is problematic, it is argued that the census can still be a reliable and useful source of evidence if handled carefully. The chapter goes on to examine patterns of marriage, alongside standards of living, arguing that it was often not logical for working-class women to take up paid work. Chapter Three discusses the number of strategic choices working-class women could make in dealing with poverty. The focus is primarily upon charity, petty theft and prostitution, and it is possible to discern patterns relating to the age and marital status of these women.

This is not to belittle the paid employment that women in this region did take up, and Chapter Four examines some of the main features and trends of employment in the region, in both rural and urban areas. The final and longest chapter looks in detail at female involvement in broadly conceived political activities and suggests that the motivating factors and areas of interest for these women often differ from the standard picture that is presented. This chapter is split into three broad sections that examine the interaction of working-class women with popular political movements, political organisations, and elections. Although working-class women continued to be involved in broadly defined political activity during this period, it is suggested that their opportunities for 'formal' participation narrowed.

This study holds back from claiming that any tremendous turning point in gender history occurred in this region during this period. It has more modest aims. It is about continuity as much as change in the experiences of women. It is about recapturing the general experiences and politicisation of working-class women. By examining an area in which it could be argued there were few opportunities for women it is hoped to reveal the broad and varied activities these women could undertake within the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable amongst working-class communities.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# INDUSTRY AND POPULATION IN THE NORTH EAST, C.1790-1914

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The place is very impressive to me and though ghastly and frightful, very sublime & instructive – even enjoyable in its strangeness. I saw several masses of old house – and effects enough of smoke & cloud to have served Turner for a years work.

John Ruskin, on Newcastle, 1863<sup>1</sup>

This chapter charts the major changes in the structure of industry in the North East across this period and looks at the accompanying pattern of population growth. There was much variation between the different regions of nineteenth-century England and within them. The contrast Ruskin identified between the antiquity of Newcastle and its industrial modernity could stand for much of Northumberland and Durham, as well as England. This was a period of tremendous change, but also of many continuities. Given such change and the variation in its impact, an appreciation of the manner in which the industry and the population of this region changed in the North East during this period is essential to understanding the experience and choices of working-class women.

### *The North East in the Late Eighteenth Century*

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<sup>1</sup> John Ruskin to John James Ruskin, 13 May 1863, describing his impression of Newcastle, quoted in Diane Sachko Macleod, 'Private and Public Patronage in Victorian Newcastle', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 52 (1989), p. 189.

D.J. Rowe has characterised the North East of England in the eighteenth century as being a relatively simple pre-industrial society, largely agricultural and sparsely-populated, with poorly developed networks of travel and communication.<sup>2</sup> The exception to this over-generalisation was a small area along the Rivers Tyne and Wear, which dominated the region's commercial interests.<sup>3</sup> Newcastle was established by the early eighteenth century as a vital stopping-point between London and Edinburgh, and operated as a distribution centre for the region. Goods from the rural hinterland, in the form of food, coal, and clothing were transported to and from the town. The town was also central to the distribution of goods from outside the region. For example, the region had no major distiller of spirits in the eighteenth century and relied upon goods from London in this trade. There were, in the last decade of the century, twenty eight merchants and dealers in spirits in Newcastle and Gateshead, ten in Sunderland and Bishopwearmouth, nine in Durham and only eight in Darlington and Stockton.<sup>4</sup>

The region's reliance on maritime transport in goods was clear and the Tyne port was one of the busiest in England. Coal was central to the economy of Newcastle, as well as the region. Whilst fuel intensive industries, such as glassworks, took advantage of the cheaply available coal and flourished on the Tyne, the national importance of the town was secured through the role it played in the transport of coal to the capital, begun

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<sup>2</sup> D.J. Rowe, 'The North East', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, vol. i: Regions and Communities* (Cambridge, 1992), p.418-19.

<sup>3</sup> See Joyce Ellis, 'The 'Black Indies'. The Economic Development of Newcastle, c. 1700-1840', in Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster (eds.), *Newcastle upon Tyne: A Modern History* (Chichester, 2001), pp. 1-26.

<sup>4</sup> J.A. Chartres, 'Spirits in the North-East? Gin and Other Vices in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory (eds.), *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 47.

in earnest during the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> The output of coal on the River Tyne more than tripled during the eighteenth century, the majority of it travelling by sea down the east coast to London. Goods from the capital replaced coal on the return journeys and through this shipping trade Newcastle became almost a 'satellite' town to London.<sup>6</sup> Defoe had described Newcastle as a 'spacious, extended, infinitely populous place' with 'the [second] longest and largest key for landing and loading goods that is to be seen in England.'<sup>7</sup> In contrast, in the south of the region, Darlington was described as a post town that 'has nothing remarkable but dirt'.<sup>8</sup> The expansion of mercantile interests led to more sophisticated banking arrangements within the town; by the late 1780s there were five banks in Newcastle alone.<sup>9</sup>

Newcastle was the administrative centre for the County of Northumberland. The local great and good were brought together in the town during the assizes and race week, which were accompanied by a procession of balls and dances. Fashionable society gathered at the Assembly Rooms (the first assembly being held in 1716), at plays (the Theatre Royal opening in 1778), and at associations (such as the Literary and Philosophical Society, where an evening could be spent 'agreeably and usefully').<sup>10</sup> Musical performances were held frequently, the local gentry contributing to regular

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<sup>5</sup> E.L. Jones and M.E. Falkus, 'Urban Improvement and the English Economy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Peter Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century Town. A Reader in English Urban History, 1688-1820* (London, 1990), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Berry, 'Prudent Luxury: The Metropolitan Tastes of Judith Baker, Durham Gentlewoman', in Penelope Lane and Rosemary Sweet (eds.), *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth Century England: 'On the Town'* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1727; Yale, 1991), p. 282.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>9</sup> Norman McCord, *North East England: An Economic and Social History* (London, 1979), p.59.

<sup>10</sup> William Turner, *Speculations on the Propriety of Establishing a Literary Society in Newcastle upon Tyne* (Newcastle, 1793), p. 3.



subscription concerts from 1736.<sup>11</sup> New Assembly Rooms were built in between 1774-6, and were completed in a luxurious style, the 'scale of the building and its rich furnishing ... outward signs of Newcastle's cultural ambition.'<sup>12</sup> Shops, tailors and circulating libraries provided, for those that could afford it, the most recent fashions from London and abroad. Printers in the town published more books than anywhere else in England outside London, and ranked only below London, Cambridge and Oxford as the most important printing centre in the country.<sup>13</sup> At a time when few provincial towns were able to support one local newspaper, Newcastle regularly had as many as three.<sup>14</sup> This was more than merely a 'pale reflection' of the London 'Season', as has been argued by Jones and Falkus.<sup>15</sup>

The dominance of Newcastle within the region is unsurprising when it is considered that it was the fifth largest town in Britain at the start of the eighteenth century, behind London, Edinburgh, Norwich, and Bristol, and joint with Glasgow.<sup>16</sup> By mid-century Sunderland had crept up in size and was now one third the size of Newcastle. Novocastrians reacted with disbelief when it was revealed in the early 1800s that Sunderland boasted a population now only a third smaller than that of Newcastle.<sup>17</sup> There were calls for a recount of the census and confusion as to how the status of Newcastle as the most prominent town in the North East could have been so rapidly

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Borsay, 'The English Urban Renaissance: The Development of Provincial Urban Culture, c.1680-c.1760', in Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century Town*, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Berry, 'Creating Polite Space: The Organisation and Social Function of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms' in Berry and Gregory (eds.), *Creating and Consuming Culture*, p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> John Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination: The Emergence of English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), p.504.

<sup>14</sup> Three of the most prominent being the *Newcastle Courant*, published 1711-1802, the *Newcastle Journal*, 1739-88, and the *Newcastle Chronicle*, 1764-present.

<sup>15</sup> Jones and Falkus, 'Urban Improvement and the English Economy', p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce Ellis, *The Georgian Town, 1680-1840* (Basingstoke, 2001), Appendix 1, pp. 148-9.

<sup>17</sup> Sunderland was the nineteenth largest urban settlement in England c.1750 and the fifteenth in 1801. See, E. Wrigley, 'Urban Growth and Agricultural Change: England and the Continent in the Early Modern Period', in Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century Town*, p. 42.

impinged upon. In reality, the eighteenth century had seen almost every traditional regional centre overtaken by the pace of growth in ports and newer industrial towns; only Newcastle and Bristol kept up with the rapid expansion of these areas.<sup>18</sup> Sunderland had enjoyed a great deal of prosperity in the shipping and coal trade, but its geographical location on the coast, sufficiently wayward from the routes travelled by visitors passing through the region, ensured it was overshadowed by its prosperous neighbour on the Tyne.

Beyond settlements on the Tyne and Wear, growth in the region was slower, and would remain so until the 1820s, though the pace of economic change had picked up from the 1760s.<sup>19</sup> Durham and Darlington enjoyed minor status in this period, though Durham had clear ecclesiastical importance and was more closely associated with the gentry than Newcastle. Durham was also the administrative centre of County Durham, though in less spectacular style than Newcastle, and it lacked a dedicated Assembly Room. Concerts, as in Newcastle, were well attended, and a performance of Handel's *Alexander's Feast* in 1749 was praised as equal to or better than those in London.<sup>20</sup> Darlington could boast a significant textile industry in the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> In 1749, the *Universal Magazine* claimed it to be the 'most noted place in all the world for the linen manufacture of that sort called huckaback, so much used for table clothes and napkins.'<sup>22</sup> The quality of Darlington sheeting, damask and huckaback was realised in the

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<sup>18</sup> Wrigley, 'Urban Growth and Agricultural Change', p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> McCord, *North East England*, p. 25

<sup>20</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 18 November 1749, quoted in Rebecca King, 'Aspects of Sociability in the North East of England, 1600-1750', Ph.D. thesis (University of Durham, 2001), p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> M.W. Kirby, *Men of Business and Politics. The Rise and Fall of the Quaker Pease Dynasty of North East England, 1700-1943* (London, 1984), p.3. See also, Mary H. Pease, *Henry Pease. A short story of his life* (London, 1897), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Norman Sunderland, *A History of Darlington* (Darlington, 1967), p. 68.

trade it received from London residents, as well as within the North East.<sup>23</sup> Manufacturers at Barnard Castle and Durham contributed to the region's textile industry on a smaller scale. Darlington was also important in providing goods and services to South Durham, and it too could boast banking facilities before the end of the century.<sup>24</sup>

Mining although important in this period was restricted by the relatively basic extraction processes and the high cost of transporting the coal from land locked coal fields to ports and agriculture remained the most significant economic activity within the region as a whole. The quality of Northumberland farming was recognised nationally, and was essential to the livelihood of market towns.<sup>25</sup> Regular cattle markets were held at Newcastle, Morpeth, Durham, Darlington and Barnard Castle, and hiring fairs in Newcastle, Durham, Morpeth and elsewhere provided regular boosts to the local economy.<sup>26</sup> Even as late as 1851 agriculture in Northumberland employed twice as many people as coal mining. One has to be careful in drawing too clear a distinction between agriculture, mining and other industries in this period. Many trades utilised similar techniques in relation to man- and animal-power. Workers moving between these sectors would have recognized a demand for a set of similar skills and knowledge.

Whilst links with other parts of England and the world had been well-established by sea before the eighteenth century, most especially from the Tyne, travel within the region was slow and treacherous, and long distance travel the preserve of the rich.<sup>27</sup> Newcastle was central to communication with the rest of the region and England. At

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Hughes, *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1952), p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> The Backhouse Bank was founded in 1774

<sup>25</sup> See J. Bailey and G. Gulley, *General view of the Agriculture of Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland* (London, 1805), *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Hughes, *North Country Life*, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> See Rowe, 'The North East'.

mid-century it took three days to travel from Newcastle to York by coach. By the end of the century there were seven daily services from Newcastle departing to London, Edinburgh, and Carlisle, as well as to destinations in Northumberland and Durham. There were also regular, if not always numerous, coach services to most destinations of note in the North East.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of the eighteenth century the region had little economic importance on a national scale beyond coal, yet by the early twentieth century the North East was recognized as an essential contributor to England's economy. The growth of industry in the nineteenth century was closely tied to the expansion of population in the region.

#### *Population Growth, 1801-1851*

The population of County Durham in 1801 was 160,000, that of Northumberland 158,000. By 1851 their respective populations had grown to 411,000 and 304,000. The rate of growth in the region as a whole was below the average for England before 1821, and it was not until the figures from 1831 that growth began to outpace the national average.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Norman McCord and Richard Thompson, *The Northern Counties from AD 1000* (London, 1998), p. 194.

<sup>29</sup> As it would continue to do for the remainder of the century. These and the following figures are taken from the censuses of 1841 and 1851.

Table 1.1 *Comparative Statement of Population, 1801-51, Showing the Percentage Increase of Population in Durham and Northumberland*

	1801	%	1811	%	1821	%	1831	%	1841	%*	1851
Durham	160,361	11	177,625	17	207,673	22	253,910	27.7	324,277	26.2	411,532
N'land	157,101	9	172,161	15	198,965	12	222,912	12.2	250,268	14	303,535
England		14.5		17.5		16		14.5		10.5	

Sources: Census 1841, 1851. \*In 1851 figures from Poor Law Unions that extended across county borders were assigned as a whole to the Registration County in which the greater part of that District was enumerated. This causes some discrepancy in the figures. The percentage increase 1841-1851 is taken using the 1851 boundaries.

As is clear from Table 1.1, it was in County Durham where much of this population growth was situated – it experienced growth at almost twice the national average between 1831 and 1851. Growth was not uniform across the region and there were areas of distinct local growth. Although by 1841 Newcastle had slipped in the ranking of largest British towns to ninth, it remained the largest town between Edinburgh and Leeds, with a population of 90,000. Sunderland had by this time risen up the rankings to joint nineteenth, with Tynemouth joint thirty second.<sup>30</sup> The population of Gateshead grew by over 60% between 1831 and 1851, rising from 15,000 to 25,000, whilst Jarrow grew from a population of 1,500 in 1801 to 4,000 by 1851.<sup>31</sup> Elswick was still a small village to the west of Newcastle in 1811, with a population less than 400. By 1851 it had a population of over 3,500, only a few years after an engineering works had opened.<sup>32</sup> Whilst in Northumberland population growth was focused on the Tyne, as settlements expanded

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, *The Georgian Town*, p. 148-9; and, Joyce Ellis, 'Regional and County Centres, 1700-1840', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of England, vol. ii: 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 679.

<sup>31</sup> Norman McCord, 'Some Aspects of North-East England in the Nineteenth Century', *Northern History*, 7 (1972), p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> D.J. Rowe, 'The Economy of the North-East in the Nineteenth Century: A Survey with a Bibliography of Works Published Since 1945', *Northern History*, 6 (1971), p. 121.

along the river, the pattern was more variable in Durham. Though the growth of settlements on the Wear and the Tees accounted for some of the overall increase in population in Durham, much of the increase was due to the rapid expansion of collieries. Hetton-le-Hole was a small rural village in 1820, but the opening of Hetton Lyons Colliery, and two smaller collieries at nearby Eppleton and Elemore, during the 1820s gave rise to a population of almost 6,000 by 1831.<sup>33</sup> Thornley, in the 20 years from 1831 expanded from housing 50 persons to over 2,700.<sup>34</sup> The regional colliery population was highly mobile in this period, travelling from within County Durham and Northumberland to newly won pits and they were often joined by workers from outside the region. As much as 45% of the total increase in population between 1831 and 1841 can be attributed to migration from outside the North East.<sup>35</sup>

What then of the sex balance of the North East in this period? Females outnumbered males in both counties until 1851. In 1841, females made up 50.6% of the population in County Durham, 51.5% in Northumberland, and 51% in England and Wales. In 1851 the figures slid to 49.8% in Durham and 50.9% in Northumberland, compared to a national average of 51%. Figures relating to the increase of population at each decennial period reveal further trends in this period.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Sill, 'Mid Nineteenth Century Labour Mobility: The Case of the Coal Miners of Hetton-le-Hole, County Durham', *Local Population Studies*, 22 (1979), pp. 44-50.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield. Work, Culture and Protest, 1790-1850* (Manchester, 1987), p. 123.

<sup>35</sup> J.W. House, *North Eastern England: Population Movements and the Landscape Since the Early Nineteenth Century* (Newcastle, 1954), p. 51. Migrants typically came from areas of economic depression, such as Ireland and later East Anglia, or areas with similar industries, as well as from adjacent counties.

Table 1.2 *The Increase of Males and Females in the Population of Durham and Northumberland with Sex Balance of that Growth, 1801-1851*

	1801- 1811	%	1811- 1821	%	1821- 1831	%	1831- 1841	%	1841- 1851	%
Durham Males	8392	50.5	15105	51.4	22350	48.7	40492	54.1	43284	52.2
Durham Females	8231	49.5	14305	49.6	23507	51.3	34311	45.9	39716	47.8
N'land Males	7226	47.6	16286	55.5	10933	44.9	15661	54.6	18342	52
N'land Females	7965	52.4	13034	44.5	13437	55.1	13016	45.4	16876	48
England Males	575452	48.6	907203	53	864737	48.4	903712	49	900916	48.6
England Females	609261	51.4	806170	47	918876	51.6	940623	51	952087	51.4

Source: Appendix, Table 4, *Census 1851*.

Although these figures relate only to the increase of males and females, rather than the overall figures, it can be seen that after 1831 Durham and Northumberland buck the trends in the national pattern that they had previously aligned to. Northumberland was attracting more men to the region, even if in 1851 females were still in the majority overall. In Durham that 50.2% of the region's population was female disguised the quickening imbalance of population growth it was experiencing in favour of men.

Again, there were areas of concentration in this growth. Stockton in 1841 had a population of 29,789, and 400 more females than males. By 1851 the population had leapt to 52,934, males outnumbering females now by over 600. In Gateshead there were sixty five more females than men in 1841; within ten years the population had grown by 25%, men now outnumbering women by 350.<sup>36</sup> There were places where this pattern was not replicated. Mining areas such as Auckland and Easington, which had grown rapidly

<sup>36</sup> These and following figures are obtained from Census 1841, 1851.

during the 1820s and 1830s, saw some movement towards a balancing of the population by 1851, though men still outnumbered women overall and in terms of new arrivals. In Newcastle, Tynemouth and Sunderland, women outnumbered men by up to three thousand. That these were port towns and many men would have been employed at sea helps explain some of the difference, though these towns undoubtedly attracted migrant females.

Table 1.3 *Females as a Percentage of the Population, Aged 15-40, in County Durham, 1841*

	15-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40
Principal Towns	50.5%	53%	52%	53%	52%
Remainder of County	48.2%	47.3%	47.3%	48.4%	48%
Total of County	49.6%	50.8%	50.2%	51.1%	50.5%

Table 1.4 *Females as a Percentage of the Population, Aged 15-40, in Northumberland, 1841*

	15-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40
Principal Towns	51.4%	53.9%	53%	52.45	51.8%
Remainder of County	51.5%	52%	52%	51.1%	50.5%
Total of County	51.4%	53.3%	52.6%	52%	51.4



Table 1.5 *Females as a Percentage of the Population, Aged 15-40, in England, 1841*

	15-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	35-40
Principal Towns	52.5%	55.1%	53.6%	52.7%	51.9%
Remainder of England	48.4%	50.9%	50.9%	50.2%	49.5%
Total of England	50.8%	53.5%	52.5%	51.8%	50.9%

Source: Census 1841.

It would be expected that females would be well represented among young town dwellers, and the census confirms this.<sup>37</sup> Females accounted for just under 62% of persons aged twenty to twenty five in Tynemouth, 61% in South Shields, 60% in Hexham, 57% in Sunderland, 56% in Darlington, and 53% in Durham City, though the figures fell as low as 45% in the lead-mining area of Allendale. The above tables suggest the importance of the principal towns in both Northumberland and Durham as sites of dwelling for young females, though both fall below the figures for England as a whole. Although in Northumberland this was because the proportion of females was fairly steady in both principal towns and elsewhere, this is not the case with Durham. Whilst in the age group fifteen to forty as a whole women were in the majority in all of the principal towns, the balance was reversed elsewhere in the county. National figures show a similar tendency, though the trend is decidedly more marked in County Durham. The distinction was clear even a short distance from towns, as shown by figures from 1851, which encompassed the population living within the districts of the Poor Law Unions as a whole rather than just the towns. Females in the district of Tynemouth constituted only 48% of the population aged twenty to twenty five: in South Shields, 51%; Hexham, 53%;

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, *The Georgian Town*, p. 30.

Sunderland, 53%; Morpeth, 46%. These figures are consistent with those of other age groups. This is in stark contrast to the statistics relating to towns in 1841 and 1851. In mid-century Durham City, 54% of the 20-25 year old population was female, in contrast to 45% in Durham Poor Law Union. Although it would be tempting to conclude that women increasingly moved into larger urban settlements within the county, a large part of the difference must also be explained by male migration from urban areas to newly established collieries.<sup>38</sup> The rapid expansion of many of the smaller settlements in County Durham, between 1830 and 1850, meant that there were few indigenous females to migrate from those areas into the towns, and certainly not in the numbers necessary to account for the difference. Rather, it might be concluded that the expansion of industry outside of larger urban settlements in Durham resulted in more remote rural areas being swamped with male labourers and that towns were particularly successful at retaining their female population whilst drawing in younger females from the immediate hinterland.

### *The Growth of Industry, 1800-50*

Over the course of this fifty year period the output of coal from the region rose from 4.5 million to 10.5 million tons.<sup>39</sup> Shipments from the Tyne alone doubled between 1831 and 1851. In a fifteen-year period after 1830 the export of coal from the Tyne rose six-fold to over one million tons. The expansion of the coal mining industry in the region was

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<sup>38</sup> See House, *North Eastern England*.

<sup>39</sup> The following section is based upon McCord, *North East England*; Rowe, 'The North East'; Rowe, 'The Economy of the North-East'; Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*; and, James Alan Jaffe, 'Economy and Community in Industrializing England: The Durham Mining Region Before 1840', Ph.D. thesis (Columbia University, 1984).

fuelled by demand from London and abroad. Such growth was made possible thanks to technological advancements and the reduction in export and coastwise duties.<sup>40</sup> Deeper pits could be sunk as steam power was increasingly used to pump water from the seam to the surface, whilst the cost of transporting the coal from the collieries was reduced by the use of wagon ways. In South Durham the growth of railways allowed the connection of landlocked coalfields with ports on Teeside: 'The coal-fields of this district' were 'intimately connected with the railway system, both in its origin and maintenance'.<sup>41</sup> The demand for coal encouraged exploratory sinkings. The coal seam at Hetton was topped by a layer of limestone and extraction was thought too costly to be workable. The success of the colliery at Hetton during the 1820s led to a general expansion on the East Durham coalfield despite the high costs involved breaking through the limestone and the risk to capital investors.

Coal mining wages were generally high and those employed directly in coal mining more than tripled from 12,000 to 40,000. The average colliery in England at the end of this period was said to employ less than one hundred above and below ground. The smaller collieries around Newcastle frequently employed three times that number and those in Durham many more again.<sup>42</sup> The 1841 census revealed around 15% of the male population in the North East was directly employed in coal mining. Once those industries reliant upon the coal trade – engineers, shipwrights, sailors, glassworks, chemical works – are taken into account the figure becomes much larger.

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<sup>40</sup> In 1831 export duties were reduced, and in 1845 abolished, for British colliers.

<sup>41</sup> W.G. Armstrong, I. Bell and J. Taylor (eds.), *Industrial Resources of the District of the Three Northern Rivers, The Tyne, Wear, and Tees, Including the Reports on the Local Manufactures* (London, 1864), p. xviii.

<sup>42</sup> Maxine Berg, 'Factories, Workshops and Industrial Organisation', in Roderick Floud and D.N. McCloskey (eds.), *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 140.

The glass and chemical industries were the most important national industries besides coal in the early nineteenth century and were centred on the Tyne. The Cookson glass factory at South Shields was the largest producer in the country by the 1830s, Tyneside as a whole producing over 25% of England's output, although there was not significant national consumption.<sup>43</sup> At mid-century the region's chemical works employed over 3,000, just under half of the total workforce in the industry. The largest manufacturer of pottery at mid-century, C.T. Maling, was based on Tyneside, whilst by 1820 over 300,000 pottery pieces were being shipped from Wearside. At South Shields 7% of the occupied workforce was employed in glass, pottery and chemicals in 1851, and 5.5% at Gateshead.<sup>44</sup> The construction of wooden sailing ships on the Tyne and the Wear expanded during this period, especially at Sunderland, though the industry was typified by a large number of small-scale enterprises and subsidiary industries such as sailcloth production. In other textile manufacture the mill at Darlington remained an important employer in this period, though the business lacked the vibrancy of Lancashire and elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> A quarter of occupied adult males were employed at textile works in the town in 1831, but the industry was more generally marked by decline in this period. There were smaller textile manufacturers at Alnwick, Durham, Barnard Castle, Morpeth and Hexham in this period, but most were short lived and few survived beyond the 1830s.

The development of railways ensured steady advancements in the region's engineering industry, though its importance in creating a modern transport network impacted upon the region more widely. The railway between Carlisle and Newcastle was

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<sup>43</sup> See further, George Hodgson, *The History of South Shields* (Newcastle, 1924), pp. 238-248.

<sup>44</sup> Figures from D.J. Rowe, 'Occupations in Northumberland and Durham, 1851-1911', *Northern History*, 8 (1973), pp. 119-31.

<sup>45</sup> C.B. Phillips and J.H. Smith, *Lancashire and Cheshire from AD 1540* (London, 1994), *passim*.

completed between 1829 and 1839 in stages, in addition to a connection to North Shields. Gateshead, Sunderland and South Shields were connected by rail in 1840, Newcastle and Darlington in 1844, Berwick and Newcastle 1847, and with the completion of track over the River Tyne it was possible by 1849 to travel from London to Edinburgh without changing. Upon the completion of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825, the *Newcastle Courant* praised the benefits the 25 mile length of track would bring: '[it] will open the London market in the collieries in the western part of the county of Durham, as well as facilitate the obtaining of fuel to the country along its line, and the northern parts of Yorkshire.'<sup>46</sup> This track, in providing a pathway for the transportation of coal from South Durham to the sea, was responsible for the growth of Teesside. Stockton proved to be unsuitable as a point at which to transport the coal brought by railway to seaborne vessels and a point on the South bank of the River Tees was found. The railway extension to Middlesbrough was completed in 1830. By 1851 96,000 people were situated on Teesside. 60% of this population lived in settlements of less than 2,000, though Middlesbrough had grown from a minute hamlet of 40 in the 1820s to housing over 7,400 in 1851. However, the economy of Middlesbrough was far from secure in this period as it faced competition from rival shippers of coal, not only from the Tyne and the Wear but from the increasingly sophisticated national network of rail that had initiated its initial growth.

The expansion of the railway network across the North East had allowed for a greater freedom of movement than had ever experienced before and was essential to the growth of industry. This growth and mobility could carry a heavy price for smaller trades as they were brought into fierce competition with urban economies: 'The better class' of

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<sup>46</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 1 October 1825.

North Shields and Hexham were said to have gone 'to Newcastle, where there is greater choice', and did so with greater ease when they were connected by rail.<sup>47</sup> Morpeth in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a prosperous market town. Its cattle market supplied the whole district ensuring extra trade for hotels, pubs and shops as butchers from around the region travelled there to purchase stock.<sup>48</sup> The opening of a cattle market in Newcastle in July 1830, and improved transport links to the town, removed at a stroke the majority of Morpeth's cattle custom and undermined its whole economy. Previously, butchers from as far as Sunderland had travelled to Morpeth for stock.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, although in 1832 tanning was considered the most 'staple and important trade' of the town, by 1852 its biggest tanner had closed and the industry had almost disappeared by 1870 in the face of urban competition.<sup>50</sup>

This period had seen a quickening of pace in the industrial development of the North East, although, coal excepted, this had mostly come in smaller, secondary industries. The region had little economic importance nationally beyond its mining industry. The rapid rise of the region's iron and steel industries, such as engineering and iron shipbuilding, in the latter half of the century gave the North East a 'commanding importance in the national economy.'<sup>51</sup> This was accompanied by an extraordinary expansion in the region's population.

### *Population Growth, 1851-1911*

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<sup>47</sup> Francis Mewburn, *The Larchfield Diary. Extracts from the Diary of the Late Mr Mewburn, First Railway Solicitor* (London, 1876), p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> See for example the description of a Sunderland butcher's regular travels to Morpeth in, Taylor Potts, *Sunderland: A History of the Town, Port, Trade and Commerce* (Sunderland, 1892), p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>50</sup> Ian Willis, 'Morpeth: A Northumbrian Market Town in the Nineteenth Century', in T.E. Faulkner (ed.), *Northumbrian Panorama: Studies in the History and Culture of North East England* (London, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> Rowe, 'The Economy of the North-East', p. 132.

By 1911 over two million people resided in the North East; more than an eight fold growth from 1801. The expansion in population was above the average for England throughout the second half of the century, although less marked in Northumberland. The population of this county had grown 230% from mid-century, to just below 700,000, though this was dwarfed by the growth of County Durham whose population grew by 333%, to approximately 1,370,000. Durham had experienced above average population growth in the final three decades of this period, though the fastest rates of increase in this county were concentrated in the decades before 1881. As can be seen in Table 1.6, Northumberland enjoyed steady, if unspectacular, growth prior to 1891.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> If figures are taken from population growth in England and Wales, Northumberland does not surpass the average until 1891.

**Table 1.6 Comparative Statement of Population, 1851-1911, Showing the Percentage Increase of Population in Durham and Northumberland as Compared to England**

	1851	%	1861	%	1871	%	1881	%	1891	%	1901	%	1911
Durham	411,532	31.7	542,125	26.3	685,045	27.7	875,166	17	1,024,369	15.9	1,187,361	15.3	1,369,860
N'land	303,535	12.9	343,025	12.8	386,959	12.2	434,086	16.5	506,030	19.3	603,498	15.5	696,898
England		11.8		11.7		13.2		8.9		9.8		7.6	

*Sources:* Census's 1851-1911

**Table 1.7 Males as a Percentage of Population in County Durham and Northumberland, 1851-1911, as Compared to England and Wales**

	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911
Durham	50.21	50.89	51.53	51.17	50.94	50.7	50.4
Northumberland	49.14	49.75	49.83	49.73	49.86	50.14	49.72
England & Wales	48.89	48.7	48.63	48.66	48.45	48.35	47.1

*Sources:* Census's 1851-1911



Whilst the rate of population increase in Durham began to slow after 1881, its neighbour enjoyed a period of growth well above the national average. Naturally, population change was not spread evenly within the counties, and certain areas followed patterns distinct from the county average. Elswick continued the rapid growth it had experienced during the 1840s. In the decade after 1851 the population more than quadrupled to reach over 14,000. By 1861 more people were employed by the Armstrong Engineering works at Elswick than had lived there ten years previously.<sup>53</sup> The population of Sunderland, Gateshead and Tynemouth all grew by more than 20% between 1851 and 1861,<sup>54</sup> whilst the county borough of Newcastle experienced population growth that was generally above the average rate of Northumberland: it was almost double the county average between 1851-61 and 1881-91, though less than half during 1901-11.<sup>55</sup> In rural Northumberland, districts economically reliant upon farming saw a decline in their population. Between 1851 and 1861, six of the twelve Northumberland registration counties recorded a drop in population.<sup>56</sup> Though there was some growth in these areas towards the end of the century, these rural districts were generally less populated in 1901 than 1851. In common with Durham throughout the nineteenth century, areas that experienced population growth outside of urban settlements were generally associated with mining. Bedlington, in the district of Morpeth, grew by over 50% in the ten years after 1850, whilst Bishop Auckland in the same period expanded by over 75%.

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<sup>53</sup> Rowe, 'The Economy of the North East', p.121.

<sup>54</sup> These and the following figures are taken from the relevant population Census.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Barke, 'The People of Newcastle: A Democratic History', in Colls and Lancaster (eds.), *Newcastle upon Tyne*, p. 135.

<sup>56</sup> These were Alnwick (-0.3%), Berwick (-10.2%), Belford (-9.8%), Glendale (-8.6%), Rothbury (-3.9%) and Haltwhistle (-8.9%).

The greatest growth regionally occurred in South Durham, around the River Tees. In the thirty years before 1881 the population had more than trebled to over 300,000, as workers flooded into the area to take up jobs in the rapidly developing iron and steel industry. By the 1880s, 35,000 people resided in Darlington and 41,000 in Stockton. The growth of Middlesbrough was the most rapid. A population of 7,000 in 1851 grew to 56,000 by 1881, and almost 100,000 by the end of the century.

Inward migration was a principal factor in this growth, especially before the 1870s. From the 1880s natural increase played a more dominant role in the region as a whole, though inward migration could still play a part in certain localities; the sinking of two new shafts at North Walbottle in the 1890s attracted 'Irish, Scots and Welsh ... into the district to work at the new pit.'<sup>57</sup> Young males made up the bulk of these migrants. In 1871, the Irish in Middlesbrough accounted for 10% of the total population, but 20% of adult males.<sup>58</sup> Durham had the lowest female-to-male ratio of any English county in 1871 and this continued to be the case until the end of the century. Northumberland's female-to-male ratio was slightly lower than the national average in this period, although females outnumbered males in every census year, except 1901 (see Table 1.7). As can be seen in Table 1.8, the population growth of Durham, fuelled by inward migration, was over balanced in the favour of males for the period before 1880. Thereafter, the trend was reversed and followed more closely the national pattern, reflected in the overall sex balance of the county in Table 1.7.<sup>59</sup> The sex balance of Northumberland's growth

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<sup>57</sup> TWAS, DX 201/1, Reminiscences of J. Allison, Miner, of North Walbottle. See also, House, *North Eastern England*.

<sup>58</sup> Malcolm Chase, 'The Teeside Irish in the Nineteenth century', *Cleveland and Teeside Local History Society*, 69 (1995), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> The percentage of males remained above the national average suggesting the continuing importance of inward male migration to population growth.

fluctuated, mostly favouring men until the end of the century, though the modest expansion of population experienced by the county prior to 1881 prevented males outnumbering females until 1901.

The pattern of sex balance amongst urban and rural dwellers is complicated in the latter half of this century.<sup>60</sup> In County Durham, the rapid expansion of Stockton and Middlesbrough resulted in urban settlements dominated by young men. In 1871 only 39% of the population aged 20-25 in Middlesbrough was female, though this had risen to 46% by 1891. There did, however, remain a high proportion of women in most principal towns. Sunderland and Durham City continued to be populated by more young women than men: 54% of those aged 20-30 in 1901 were female. In the larger towns, pockets of industry created areas with a large sex imbalance. In 1861, St Nicholas parish of Newcastle, held a population that was only 38% female, in contrast to the neighbouring parish of a similar size, St Andrews, where the figure was 55%. However, by 1891 the balance in both parishes was nearer the average for Newcastle as a whole, reflecting an overall trend towards equilibrium in the sex balance during this period.<sup>61</sup> Established mining areas in the county furthered the trend they had previously experienced towards equilibrium, as families settled. Natural growth contributed increasingly to population growth, though there continued to be a marked difference, especially in the younger age ranges, at newly won collieries, such as at Bedlington and Ashington. In areas of economic decline, such as Allendale, where lead-mining had begun to decline during the third quarter of the century, the picture from the first half of the century reversed. The

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<sup>60</sup> The changing nature of this balance within this period is difficult to establish with sufficient accuracy due to the different boundaries used by successive censuses. As such representative examples are used.

<sup>61</sup> Females accounted for 48% of the population at St Nicholas, 52% at St Andrews and 51% in Newcastle as a whole.

Table 1.8 *The Increase of Males and Females in Durham and Northumberland, with the Sex Balance of that growth 1851-1911*

	1851 - 1861	%	1861 - 1871	%	1871 - 1881	%	1881 - 1891	%	1891 - 1901	%	1901 - 1911	%
Durham Male	46,792	53.6	77,128	54	94,829	49.9	73,960	49.6	80,635	49.4	88,030	48.3
Durham Female	40,463	46.4	65,792	46	95,292	50.1	75,243	50.4	82,470	50.6	94,356	51.7
N'land Male	27,887	52.4	22,136	50.4	23,081	49	36,401	50.6	49,850	51.5	44,585	47.4
N'land Female	25,380	47.6	21,798	49.6	24,046	51	35,543	49.4	46,939	48.5	49,494	52.6
England & Wales M	1,079,811	47.2	1,198,004	48	1,599,499	48.9	1,412,999	46.7	1,675,712	47.5	1,716,995	48.5
England & Wales F	1,207,092	52.8	1,296,433	52	1,670,832	51.1	1,615,087	53.3	1,849,606	52.5	1,825,654	51.5

Sources: Census's 1851-1911

population here declined by almost 40% from 1851-1891: of the remaining inhabitants females constituted over 53%. Bellingham suffered a similar fate. The discovery of iron ore during 1847 brought with it an influx of 'dirty, ill-conditioned Irish labourers'; the subsequent realisation that the deposit was too thin to be mined economically ensured their hasty departure.<sup>62</sup>

### *Industrial Expansion and Rural Decline, 1851-1914*

The North East in the second half of the nineteenth-century witnessed rapid industrial growth. On the Rivers Tyne and Wear population growth coincided with the development and maturity of the engineering and shipbuilding industries, whilst the discovery of iron ore in southern Durham sparked the growth of the iron and steel industry based upon the River Tees. Although iron shipbuilding began on the Tyne during the 1840s, the first iron steamer launching from Walker in 1842, little progress was made in the industry until the 1850s. Demand was mostly for wooden colliers and it was not until the increasing cost of transportation by railway had impacted considerably upon the sale of coal to the London market that an iron screw collier – the 'John Bowes' – was designed. This was capable of making the journey from the North East to London and back in five days with a cargo of 650 tons: it took two wooden colliers nearly six times as long to transport the same amount. The success of the 'John Bowes' was credited by local industrial leaders with 'the important development of iron shipbuilding in this district, and the fact that we continue to supply so largely the London market with

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<sup>62</sup> L.E.O. Charlton, *The Recollections of a Northumbrian Lady, 1815-1866, Being the Memoirs of Barbara Charlton* (London, 1949), p. 181.

coals.<sup>63</sup> In 1853, the year after the launch of the 'John Bowes', an iron ship was built on the Wear, followed closely by vessels from the Tees. By the early 1860s around one million tons of coal a year was transported by iron screw steamer from the North East to London. As an exporter, Newcastle was the second most important port in the country by 1883.<sup>64</sup> As well as ships built for cargo, two shipbuilders on the River Tyne, Palmers and Armstrong, dominated the construction of naval ships: ninety warships were launched from the Tyne in the years 1893-4 alone.<sup>65</sup> The annual finished tonnage of iron ships from the region more than quadrupled in the forty years from 1860 to almost 500,000 tons.<sup>66</sup> The North East was responsible for around a quarter of worldwide new shipbuilding by 1901, and by the end of this period employed over 50,000 workmen – half the total employed in shipping within Britain<sup>67</sup> – up from less than 10,000 in 1862.<sup>68</sup> The boom in shipbuilding impacted upon other industries, creating a demand for iron and steel, which accordingly increased local demand on the coal supply. It also created a new market for those concerned with the 'importation of timber, the construction of engines, and the supply of anchors, chains, sails, &c.'<sup>69</sup> Conversely, a decline in shipbuilding had a negative effect upon these reliant trades.

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<sup>63</sup> Armstrong, Bell and Taylor (eds.), *Industrial Resources*, p. 241. The work of the Tyne Improvement Committee in the second half of the century was essential in improving access to the River Tyne and helped ensured facilities here were superior to those on the Wear and Tees.

<sup>64</sup> This is based on export tonnage, rather than export value, where Newcastle would lie sixth. Oliver Lendrum, 'An Integrated Elite. Newcastle's Economic Development, 1840-1914', in Colls and Lancaster (eds.), *Newcastle upon Tyne*, p.29.

<sup>65</sup> McCord, 'Some Aspects of North-East England', p. 76.

<sup>66</sup> Rowe, 'The Economy of the North East', p. 136.

<sup>67</sup> Norman McCord, 'Some Aspects of Change in the Nineteenth Century North East', *Northern History*, 31 (1995) p. 246. Though these figures were only reached during periods of good trade; see, Charles Russell, *Social Problems of the North* (London, 1913), p. 141.

<sup>68</sup> Armstrong, Bell and Taylor (eds.), *Industrial Resources*, p. 245. These figures are exclusive of those working in ancillary trades.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

The discovery of iron ore near Middlesbrough in 1850 launched the iron industry on the Tees. The amount of pig iron smelted in the region during 1860 was almost 660,000 tons, above that produced by Staffordshire and two-thirds of that produced in South Wales and Scotland. In other words, it had taken only ten years for the industry to compete and challenge with areas that had long established histories of iron production.<sup>70</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century the North East was responsible for less than half a percent of national pig iron output; in 1850 the region produced 5% of overall output; by 1900 it produced more than a third of the nine million tons produced nationwide.<sup>71</sup> In Middlesbrough 25% of the town's workforce was employed within the iron and steel industry and over 22% at Darlington; these employees were all male, iron and steel offering no employment opportunities for women.<sup>72</sup> By 1887, a local newspaper complained that Darlington was becoming a 'residential town' and that there was 'not much hope it will become a great trade centre again', as it was in the late eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup> The iron and steel industry's reliance upon exports left it open to fluctuations, and there were closures in the trade in the late 1870s. Whilst most branches of the industry survived cyclical trends in prosperity, none repeated the success of early growth.

The growth of the iron and steel industries on Teeside increased the pressure on local supplies of coal. Consequently, the export tonnage of coal from the Tees declined in this period, though output increased. Coal mining dominated employment figures in both counties by the end of the century. In Northumberland those occupied in mining

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>71</sup> Rowe, 'The Economy of the North East', p. 134.

<sup>72</sup> David Taylor, *Policing the Victorian Town. The Development of the Police in Middlesbrough, c.1840-1914* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 101; Gillian Cookson, *The Townscape of Darlington* (Suffolk, 2003), p. 75.

<sup>73</sup> *Northern Review*, 5 February 1887.

increased from 11,000 at mid-century, to 37,000 in 1901. This represents an increase from less than 9% of those engaged in all employment to over 15%. By 1911 coal mining provided 20% of all employment in Northumberland to almost 55,000 miners. In County Durham the number employed as miners had more than trebled from 1851 to 100,000 (accounting for 23% of all employment) rising to 152,000 in 1911 (30%).<sup>74</sup> This increasing demand for coal, not only from industry but from households, allowed the exploitation of seams in south east Northumberland. By 1891, Bedlington had more than trebled in size since 1851, whilst Ashington had grown from almost nothing to boasting a population of over 10,000: agriculture was replaced by coal. The demand for coal during this period led some owners to advertise for labourers in Deptford and East London.<sup>75</sup> There was not only a movement of people into the North East, but great mobility within the two counties, especially from Northumberland to Durham: 'the amount of movement should lead us to reject the notion that Durham mining settlements were inward-looking, closed communities.'<sup>76</sup>

In 1864 a hope was expressed that 'with our cheap fuel, magnificent and improving harbours, and enormous commerce' industry would continue to develop and 'assist in maintaining, for the North of England, a very honourable rank in those industrial communities which contribute so largely to the welfare and prosperity of the British Empire.'<sup>77</sup> Though, to an extent, this was borne out in the industries so far described, there were many trades that failed to take off in the second half of the century. Facing

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<sup>74</sup> McCord, *North East England*, pp. 112, 117.

<sup>75</sup> Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (London, 1994), p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> P. Norris, J.C. Dewdney and A.R. Townsend, 'Demographic and Social Change in the Durham Coalfield: (iii) Birthplace and migration, 1851-1881', *University of Durham Geography Department, Census Research Unit, Working Paper 25* (Unpublished, June 1984).

<sup>77</sup> Armstrong, Bell and Taylor (eds.), *Industrial Resources*, p. 119.



stiff competition from home and abroad, but unable to compete successfully for the available capital and resources within the region, the chemical, pottery and glassmaking trades suffered major decline. Alkali works based on the River Tyne prospered during the 1860s, producing half of the national output, reaching a commercial peak in the 1880s.<sup>78</sup> Yet, by 1900, the trade was almost non-existent. Pottery and glass making suffered a similar decline, in the face of foreign competition, despite investment in mechanising many of its processes. The manufacture of paper, though it enjoyed some success, never became more than a minor industry. During the first half of the century a number of small country mills, such as Houghton Mill at Hexham, became extinct. The trade was concentrated on the Rivers Tyne and Wear by the 1860s, where much of the work was done by machine, and the few factories that remained employed only a few hundred workers each.<sup>79</sup>

An important aspect of the region's economy away from heavy industry was the provision of goods and services. In rural areas retail facilities remained basic, but industrial development encouraged the extension and transformation of urban retail facilities. In the first half of the century this can best be seen in the proliferation of grocers, confectioners, drapers and butchers in urban areas and towards the end of the period in the development of large department stores such as Bainbridges and Fenwicks. Co-operative retailing was also popular, despite its stop-start nature in the first half of the century.<sup>80</sup> The uneven impact of industrial expansion did, however, have an adverse

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<sup>78</sup> Lendrum, 'An Integrated Elite', p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> Armstrong, Bell and Taylor (eds.), *Industrial Resources*, p. 217-23; McCord, *North East England*, p. 142.

<sup>80</sup> See M. Purvis, 'Co-operative Retailing in England, 1835-50: Developments Beyond Rochdale', *Northern History*, 22 (1986), pp. 198-215.

effect on rural areas, that, unable to compete with urban centres and struggling to cope with dwindling populations, often saw a reduction in available services.

Hexham and Morpeth suffered in the first half of the century from the competition that improved communications opened up. Hexham produced over 23,500 pairs of gloves a year in the early 1820s and supported four tanneries, though both trades fell into decline over the century.<sup>81</sup> These towns had begun to come to terms with the realities of the railway age from mid-century, coping with the contraction of their traditional function, in a similar fashion to how some mining communities managed to expand; by becoming a local centre for shops and facilities, providing for smaller settlements in the vicinity. A Morpeth doctor commented in 1867 that 'in the neighbourhood of the town, butchers' and grocers' carts were constantly met upon the road.'<sup>82</sup> That Hexham and Morpeth were connected to Newcastle by rail ensured a population growth in the second half of the century that was slow in comparison to many urban areas, but fast enough to 'accommodate some change and modernisation as compared with villages whose population was stagnant.'<sup>83</sup> As a result, new houses, shops and amenities were built in these market towns. There were attempts towards the end of the century to develop these towns as rural escapes from urban life, a point that the chairman of Morpeth's hydropathy business made clear in his description of their facilities as a release from the 'worry and bustle of pounds, shillings and pence.'<sup>84</sup> Hydropathy facilities were also built at Hexham

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<sup>81</sup> A.B. Wright, *An Essay Towards a History of Hexham: In Three parts: Illustrating its Ancient and its Present State, Civil and Ecclesiastical Economy, Antiquities and Statistics, with Descriptive Sketches of the Scenery and Natural History of the Neighbourhood* (Alnwick, 1823), p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Willis, 'Morpeth: A Northumbrian Market Town', p. 81.

<sup>83</sup> D.J. Rowe, 'The Social and Economic Characteristics of Northumberland in the 1880s', in W.S.F. Pickering (ed.), *A Social History of the Diocese of Newcastle 1882-1982*, (London, 1981), p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Alistair J. Durie, 'The Business of Hydropathy in the North of England, c.1850-1930', *Northern History*, 39 (2002), p. 54.

during the 1870s. Although the opening of the Newcastle to Berwick railway had in many ways contributed to the decline of trade at Morpeth and Hexham, it was this transport network running through the towns that ensured they did not suffer the fatal decline of many other rural settlements. The village of Etal, in the parish of Ford, maintained five shoemakers in 1845, all of whom could boast of 'thriving trade'. Sixty years later there was not a single shoemaker or cobbler in trade within the entire parish.<sup>85</sup> At Stannington, a village five miles south of Morpeth, both its colliery and spinning mill had closed before mid-century. A description of the village in the early 1890s reveals the isolation these villages faced: there were no daily papers, residents had to travel to meet the postman, water had to be brought by horse and cart, whilst a market van went to Newcastle for supplies once a week.<sup>86</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, a quarter of the population was made up of residents at a nearby reformatory housing boys from both Northumberland and Durham.<sup>87</sup>

The decline of these rural towns is often associated with a decrease in the overall importance of farming, but can more rightly be associated with the limited number of rural areas that adopted new procedures. Although the agricultural techniques used in Northumberland and Durham were regarded in the early 1800s as the most effective in the country, the use of modern methods was never widespread. Northumberland was more advanced than Durham and the more fertile eastern half of the county more than the west.<sup>88</sup> The New Domesday survey of 1873 revealed that half of Northumberland was held in great estates of 2000 acres or more and it was these landlords whose wealth was

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<sup>85</sup> Hastings M. Neville, *A Corner in the North. Yesterday and Today with Border Folk* (Newcastle, 1909), p. 80.

<sup>86</sup> Northumberland Record Office (hereafter NRO), ZRI 52/24, *Recollections of Stannington*.

<sup>87</sup> *Kelly's Trade Directory of Northumberland*, (London, 1910), p. 481.

<sup>88</sup> McCord, *North East England*, p. 27.

tied up in vast amounts of land who could afford, and found practical, to adopt more profitable approaches. Smaller farms on less fertile land could not compete with these bigger farms and the higher wages of Durham's burgeoning industries. Although farms in Northumberland hired fewer people as techniques improved, they still remained an important source of employment for many. Annual hirings attracted huge numbers, as at Alnwick in 1875, where between 2000 and 3000 people gathered to seek farm work. It was not until the serious agricultural depressions of the 1880s that owners reassessed the benefits of owning large amounts of land for farming and agriculture in Northumberland fell into serious decline.

This chapter has outlined the broad changes that the North East experienced in its industry and population structure, at a regional level and in rural and urban areas. The changes predominantly favoured larger industries that almost exclusively hired only men; there was little, if any place for women within the industries that experienced the greatest growth in this region. The developments were not even across the region and this can be seen to have impacted upon the population growth and sex balance. A thorough understanding of the economic structure of the North East is vital to understand the experience of working-class women in the region. This, though, is not an economically deterministic account of female lives or of the creation of the female working classes. The structure of the regional economy and the differing circumstances of the urban and rural did have a great influence over the lives of working-class women (and men) as we will see in the following sections. This helped shape their political experiences but did not have a greater causal power over the direction of their lives than social factors.

## CHAPTER TWO

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# RATES OF FEMALE EMPLOYMENT AND STANDARDS OF LIVING

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There are men who toil because work is a pleasure to them, and there are others who toil because work is a duty; but the great majority of mankind are only stimulated to labour, that in amount or character is distasteful to them, by the hope that they may be able, in the first place, to maintain themselves, and secondly to marry and maintain a family in that degree of comfort which they have come to regard as necessary.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of the work performed by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has received much attention by historians of gender and few monographs regarding the position of women in this period would be complete without some discussion of female employment. Yet, despite the numerous and varied considerations of the subject, this field of enquiry seems to have reached something of an impasse. Recent surveys have tended to modify aspects of our knowledge rather than challenge the manner in which the topic is approached. This is perhaps unsurprising given the voluminous nature of the historiography. There is a discrepancy, though, in the approach which many historians have taken. On the one hand they highlight the institutionalised subordination of women through legal, political and social practices, whilst on the other they utilise evidence from a small minority of women as demonstration of the 'possibilities for female agency'

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<sup>1</sup> William Ogle, 'On Marriage Rates and Marriage Ages, with Special Reference to the Growth of Population', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 53 (1890), p. 253.

within paid employment.<sup>2</sup> The evidence used to describe the work of women is often derived from trades which were geographically concentrated, for example the potteries and textile mills. Though such trade was significant in certain localities, taken nationally they employed only a small number of female workers. Where historians have criticised these studies they have tended to utilise evidence taken from a national level. As such, they criticise individual studies for not properly accounting for regional differences, yet present too broad a picture, often based upon national figures, such as the census that can be unreliable unless contextualised within the individual localities they are derived from. This is not to suggest that such studies are unimportant, on the contrary it is one intention of this study to explore the sense of agency working-class women could exert. However, the evidence will come not only from a wide range of trades but from an area where rates of female employment were low, and it is proposed that the experiences of women here had more in common with that of English women in general, than the 'special cases' used in many discussions. The following section outlines some the key debates within the historiography of female employment.

### *Women and Work: The Historical Debate*

One immediate problem to consider is how the historian defines 'women's work'. Does one take a narrow view and consider only paid employment, thus running the risk of under-valuing women's work as a whole, or include work that was done for sale or exchange, though this might be difficult to distinguish from work that contributed solely

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987; London, 2002). See further, Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2001).

to the household?<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the scope of inquiry could be widened to include an analysis based upon the central issue of poverty that faced the majority of the working-class population in this period. This wider view is premised upon the constant struggle for survival, and would include not only contributions to the household, but prostitution and crime. In reality, historians have often addressed the wider aspects of work, whilst recognising that contemporaries often drew a distinction between 'formal' paid employment and other forms of work, that might have been better recognised as 'duties' or 'desperation'.<sup>4</sup> Hannah Barker in her essay on women and work between 1700 and 1850 limits her study to work that generated income, arguing that men and women in this period would be familiar with such a division. It is worth considering though how many contemporaries would have recognised prostitution, which Barker discusses, as a form of income-generating work similar to agricultural work or domestic service.<sup>5</sup> Though historians have been loose in their definition of work, this has been partly so as to give a fuller picture of the experiences of women, but also because of the nature of the evidence available.<sup>6</sup> The work of women was poorly recorded throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The census after 1851 provides an important source of information, but though useful for comparison there are problems with the data it presents.<sup>7</sup> Although a contrast between the work performed by females in the nineteenth century and before can never be exact, it is clear that opportunities were not considerably wider for women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, p.25

<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850. The Emergence of Separate Spheres* (London, 1998), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Barker, 'Women and Work', in Barker and Chalus (eds.), *Women's History*, pp. 124-151.

<sup>6</sup> This author shares somewhat in this guilt and female employment in this discussion is considered in perhaps its widest meaning.

<sup>7</sup> This is discussed more fully below.

Alongside the more limited opportunities for women, the value of their labour has been determined as lower than that of male labour since at least medieval times.<sup>8</sup> Women's labour was cheap and their work seen as supplemental to the income of households. Pamela Sharpe has argued that the women of Essex could 'contribute very little to family budgets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', and that their wages did not fluctuate with other factors in the economy. There was a large customary element to female wages though the market could have some limited influence.<sup>9</sup> Joyce Burnette has gone further and suggested in her discussion of wage gaps that the nature of wage documentation can lead to misinterpretation, and that women in the period of the 'Industrial Revolution' were paid a market, rather than a customary, wage.<sup>10</sup> This view has been challenged, most recently by Penelope Lane, who reasserts that women received a customary wage: 'The important issue is not only that women were paid a half or three-quarters of what men earned a day for the same work, but that the sexual division of labour meant women were on the whole limited to tasks that would always ensure they received lower wages.'<sup>11</sup>

As Amanda Vickery has suggested, the concept that in the transition to modern industrial capitalism women were robbed of their freedom and status is flawed.<sup>12</sup> Where once the period 1760 to 1820 was identified with the Industrial Revolution, continuity is

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<sup>8</sup> J.M. Bennett, 'Medieval Women, modern Women: Across the Great Divide', in David Aers (ed.) *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writings* (London, 1992), pp. 147-76; Sandy Bardsley, 'Women's Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present*, 165 (1999), pp. 3-29.

<sup>9</sup> Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism. Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 145, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Burnette, 'An Investigation of the Female-Male Wage Gap', *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), pp. 257-81.

<sup>11</sup> Penelope Lane, 'A Customary or Market Wage? Women and Work in the East Midlands, c. 1700-1840' in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven, and K.D.M. Snell (eds.), *Women, Work and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Suffolk, 2004), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Amanda Vickery 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383-414.



now stressed, and the economy of eighteenth-century England is now seen as more industrial than it once was.<sup>13</sup> The industrial transition of England took place at a slower rate and patterns of development and decline varied regionally.<sup>14</sup> This has consequently altered the way in which historians have approached the period of 'industrial change' and the impact it is said to have had on the position of women. Whilst it is true that 'for the mass of the population the social position of women in medieval and early modern society was never a simple one of inferiority and subjection', it is too simplistic to contrast this with the position of women in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The restrictions and discriminations that women faced in this period were of long standing and not the outcome of industrialization alone.<sup>16</sup> The work of women in pre-industrial society was largely confined to that which resembled domestic chores, especially in urban areas.<sup>17</sup> Home and work coincided for most members of the pre-industrial household, though this was clearly not the case by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

Doubts about the timing of the industrial revolution has influenced the debate as to how economic changes impacted upon the nature of female employment in this period. What has been termed the 'optimistic' view posits that these changes opened up job opportunities for women and led to their eventual emancipation.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, the

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<sup>13</sup> Maxine Berg, 'What Difference Did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution?', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), p. 23. See also, E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change. The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> M.J. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty. An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1700-1850* (Oxford, 1995), p. 144-45.

<sup>15</sup> Pat Hudson and W.R. Lee, 'Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective', in Hudson and Lee (eds.), *Women's Work and the Family Economy*, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, 'Women's Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500-1900', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), p. 608.

<sup>17</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (1930; London, 1985); R.M. Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* (London, 1971); and, Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976).

'pessimistic' view sees the industrial changes that took place as reinforcing female dependence upon men through a narrowing of job opportunities that pushed women into low-paid, low-status jobs.<sup>20</sup> As the outline of industrial change given in Chapter One might suggest, the proceeding discussion of female employment in the region confirms the 'pessimistic' view, but, as Horrell and Humphries have suggested, some of the differences between these views can be reconciled if closer attention is paid to the timing of the industrial revolution.<sup>21</sup> However, although nationally industrial change was generally slow, and there was no sudden transformation in women's work, Berg has rightly stressed that as a consequence of the debate regarding the timing of the industrial revolution economic transformation can be underplayed.<sup>22</sup> The continuity approach has relied upon figures to measure economic change that exclude the contribution women made, and as this was often in factory employment the shift from agriculture to industry becomes more pronounced once female employment is included. Berg shows the areas of economic growth that could open up opportunities for women whilst recognising the concentration of such changes in only a handful of locations. There were few concentrations of such employment in the North East; industrial change, centred upon the coal trade, came early to the region, though its greatest impact, as we have seen, came after 1850. The reconciliation between the pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints can only be taken so far, as the focus of these studies are different, the optimists often taking

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; London, 1982); and, Eric Richards, 'Women in the British Economy Since About 1700', *History*, 59 (1974), pp. 337-57.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male Breadwinner Economy', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), pp. 89-117.

<sup>22</sup> Maxine Berg 'What Difference did Women's Work Make'; and, Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), pp. 24-50. For example, the debate surrounding the pace and timing of economic structural change has led J.C.D. Clark to erroneously dismiss the industrial revolution as a 'fictitious entity'. J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 4.

up the case of a specific group of workers, pessimists looking at the employment of women as a whole.<sup>23</sup> The argument of pessimist accounts have increasingly stressed social aspects that worked alongside economic change. Sonya Rose has argued that 'industrial capitalism was made up of a complex set of independent practices that cannot be reduced to economic factors' and many others have examined the manner by which the 'male bread-winner norm' was established through the support given to 'separate spheres' by industrial changes.<sup>24</sup> Both approaches assume that the family economy 'differed markedly in the pre-industrial period from what was to follow.'<sup>25</sup>

There was though no 'simple fall from an idyllic world of the household economy to the degradation of the factory family',<sup>26</sup> although factory work did come to represent women's work in the popular imagination: the factory girl came to symbolise a 'new economic order, and as symbols they dominated debate.'<sup>27</sup> The 1830s witnessed much public discussion regarding the supposed depravity of 'factory girls'. From parliament to the press these women were seen to flout the 'cultural norms of women's social position within the working-class family' and threaten the structure of family life.<sup>28</sup> Arguments for the restriction of female labour were often couched in the language of evangelical Christianity and drew on the 'natural' dialogue associating women with family and the

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<sup>23</sup> Though optimists such as Pinchbeck recognise the gains they describe in one aspect of female employment were not replicated in other areas, critics have tended to focus on the thrust of their arguments.

<sup>24</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1992), p. 10; Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment, 1800-1984* (Cambridge, 1986); and, Catherine Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in Sandra Burman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 14-32.

<sup>25</sup> Hudson and Lee, 'Women's Work and the Family Economy', p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Rendall, *Women in an Industrialising Society: England 1750-1880* (Oxford, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Meg Gomersall, *Working-Class Girls in Nineteenth Century England. Life, Work and Schooling* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 4.

home.<sup>29</sup> Efforts were made by men to exclude women from various trades (as they would continue to do across the century) and government legislation from the mid-nineteenth century restricted women's work – in areas such as factories, agriculture and mining – passed into law under the mantle of protection: 'during the nineteenth century, the types of work that were deemed suitable for working-class women were growing narrower over time and women's own attitudes towards work were increasingly shaped by their responsibilities and relationship to domesticity.'<sup>30</sup>

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have viewed the period 1780-1850 as one where middle-class women increasingly removed themselves from active participation in business and concentrated their efforts upon the family life of home.<sup>31</sup> Though, as they argue, it was not until the 1830s and 1840s that 'gainful employment of ladies was widely denounced.'<sup>32</sup> In the 1840s concern over the employment of women as dressmakers and governesses, the areas most open to middle-class women, reached a peak. It has been argued that the decline of employment opportunities for women reversed in the period 1851-1911, although it would seem that nationally opportunities opened up mostly for the young and middle class; this study confirms this trend for the North East.<sup>33</sup> The 1851 census revealed a nationwide 'surplus' of women, although this was not evident in the region studied here. Concern over middle-class women ill-educated for suitable work, but lacking the financial support of a man, led to campaigns to widen their access to

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<sup>29</sup> Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*; and, Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. xxi.

<sup>33</sup> See Jordan, *The Women's Movement*.

respectable employment.<sup>34</sup> Whilst opportunities had opened up by 1914, no serious inroads had been made into traditionally male domains, despite the stereotype of the liberated unmarried 'New Woman'.

Studies of women within the paid workforce of the second half of the nineteenth century have often concentrated on organisations, such as the Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Industrial Council, frequently linked to the re-emergence of feminist interest in socialism. Though these organisations were of great importance and influence in raising issues relating to women workers, they could only practically assist a minority of females in employment. Many forms of employment were not suited to unionism and these organisations came to focus on specific trades and industries.<sup>35</sup> The number of women trade unionists rose from 36,980 in 1886, to 142,000 in 1892 and 433,000 in 1913. This impressive growth has to be put in context: even in 1913 less than 10% of female workers were a member of a union, and half of those were employed within the textile industry.<sup>36</sup> Female trade unions focused on industries that already employed large numbers of women, whose role may have been contested in this period but was secure enough for campaigns to improve conditions and payment of work; there were few such 'secure' employments for women in the North East.

Central to the examination of nineteenth-century employment is the occupational census. Although some historians have suggested it is too crude a measure of female employment the following section aims to rehabilitate the census as a valuable and reliable source for gender historians.

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<sup>34</sup> See Holloway, *Women and Work*, Chapter Three.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997), p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840-1940* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 54.

## *The Occupational Census*

The census is an important yet problematic source regarding employment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Edward Higgs has pointed out, numbers may be relatively un-troublesome in themselves, but the process of 'accumulating, arranging and analysing census data was not a value-free exercise.'<sup>37</sup> One of the fundamental problems when addressing the occupational data is that householders were not asked what they did, but what they called themselves.<sup>38</sup> This may have had the effect of making male employment seem more stable than it actually was, as male householders that undertook a number of different forms of employment recorded only the occupation of highest status. This has also contributed to an acute under-recording of female employment, as it is likely that many males would have returned their wives and daughters as unemployed, 'refusing to reveal to enumerators that [they] ... worked for money.'<sup>39</sup> It has been suggested by Patricia Branca that though a wife may be engaged in paid employment, her duties as a housewife were entered as her recorded 'occupation', or rather 'un-occupation'. As such the predominance of young, single women amongst factory workers may merely be the chimera of statistical inaccuracy.<sup>40</sup> Amongst agricultural workers, Higgs has suggested a upward revision to female participation of over 30 per cent, although Michael

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth Century Censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), p. 60. See also, Edward Higgs, *Making Sense of the Census: Census Records for England and Wales 1801-1901: A Handbook for Historical Researchers* (London, 2005); and, Bridget Hill, 'Women, Work and the Census: A Problem for Historians of Women', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), pp. 78-94.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Occupational Censuses and the Agricultural Workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), p. 704.

<sup>39</sup> Ellen Jordan, 'Female Unemployment in England and Wales 1851-1911: An Examination of the Census Figures for 15-19 Year Olds', *Social History*, 13 (1988), p. 181.

<sup>40</sup> Patricia Branca, 'A New Perspective of Women's Work: A Comparative Ideology', *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1975), pp. 129-53.

Anderson's examination of female factory workers in Lancashire and Cheshire suggests that such employment was recorded with a great deal of accuracy by census enumerators.<sup>41</sup> Factory work was likely to be regular, whilst much female employment was of a more temporary nature. The terms occupied and unoccupied are misleading in this sense, and not least because of the range of duties an 'unoccupied' woman might be expected to perform. That the census took place in early spring adds another dimension of difficulty to the data, in that it fails to take in seasonal work, especially important when accounting for the work of females in rural areas. The ambiguous instructions given to enumerators in 1851 to only record *regular* female employment certainly complicates the use of this data, yet it may well have been the case that the census was a fairly satisfactory account of those females who were consistently employed.<sup>42</sup> The figures representing occupied females must be used with the qualification that they may be taken only as a rough minimum value.

There are two further structural problems with the census related to this survey. The first, as discussed briefly in Chapter One, is that the boundaries used within counties were changed from one census to the next, making a comparison at a sub-regional level an intricate and often unfeasible task. The second problem regards the instructions given to enumerators beyond the issue of regular employment. Instructions were issued in 1841 that male and female dependents living with the householder and contributing to the family income, but not receiving wages, were not to be recorded. From 1851 to 1871 females performing unpaid labour within the family business were entered as occupied,

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<sup>41</sup> Higgs, 'Occupational Censuses and the Agricultural Workforce', p. 712. See also, Michael Anderson, 'What Can the Mid-Victorian Censuses Tell Us About Variation in Married Women's Employment', *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), pp. 9-30.

<sup>42</sup> On this point see the forthcoming report of the ESRC funded project, 'Male Occupational Change and Economic Growth in England, 1750-1851', by Dr Leigh Shaw-Taylor.

though in a rather imprecise fashion; although she may have specialised in any number of aspects of work, a wife working alongside her shoemaker husband was recorded merely as 'shoemaker's wife'. The same is true for the wives of innkeepers, shopkeepers, farmers, butchers and licensed victuallers. After 1881, this section of female workers were removed from the body of workers and placed within the 'unoccupied' category, whilst male relatives continued to be returned as occupied.<sup>43</sup> This makes a comparison of pre-and post-1881 data problematic, though not impossible. Some of the explanation for the changing nature of the census can be found in the motives of the individuals heading the census, but also in the utilisation of the census as a source of data relating to diseases resultant from insanitary conditions and overcrowding.<sup>44</sup> Though the collection, construction and presentation of census data may have been tied up with such concerns this need not lead us to concur with Davidoff and Hall that 'information on women's occupations where they were not a household head is so unreliable as to be almost useless'.<sup>45</sup> Enumerators strove for accuracy, and used with a knowledge of local economic and social conditions, and approached with due caution, the occupational census data can still shed some light on the experiences of women in this period. The following section will discuss this data and form a background for the detailed discussion of particular types of female occupation.

### *The Occupational Census and the North East*

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<sup>43</sup> Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work', p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Disease, Febrile Poisons, and Statistics: The Census as a Medical Survey, 1841-1911', *Social History of Medicine*, 4 (1991), p. 465-78.

<sup>45</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 273.



Although there are difficulties in comparing the data from the 1841 census with following years, it is nevertheless fruitful to look at this year in isolation.

Table 2.1 *Percentage of Persons Over 20 Years Old Recorded as Occupied, 1841*

	Percentage of Females Occupied	Percentage of Males Occupied
Durham	13.4%	92.37%
Northumberland	18.5%	92.54%
England	23.7%	89.83%

*Source:* Census 1841, 'Classification of occupations of Persons Enumerated in Each County of England and Wales'. Figures obtained by removing persons returned as independent, alms-people, pensioners, paupers, lunatics and prisoners to the category 'residue of population'.

As can be seen from Table 2.1 female employment was lower than the average for England in both Durham and Northumberland, whilst there was almost full male employment. In contrast, in the county of Lancashire 31.4% of females upwards of twenty years of age were recorded in employment, and 91.8% of males.<sup>46</sup> Although major industrial growth within the North East was located in the second half of the century, as discussed in the previous chapter, the pattern of low female employment seems to have already been established. Whilst the population growth of Durham in the ten years before 1841 was almost double the national average and predominantly male (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2), growth in Northumberland was less than average. Coal mining had led to male-dominated communities within Durham and Northumberland by this period but cannot by itself explain the complexities of low female employment. There

<sup>46</sup> Whilst this comparison bypasses some of the difficulties in how occupations were recorded in comparing like with like, there is the additional problem of how individual householders and enumerators recorded female employment. It is possible that males in the north east were more sensitive to the notion that they could not, by their labour alone, support their family. It is, though, unlikely that this could account for all of the difference, and reflects more the structural worklessness females faced.

were occupational categories where females were employed at rates above the national average. In agriculture, 7.45% of the workforce was female in Durham and 7.35% in Northumberland, compared to an average in England of 4.31%. However, the figures from commerce, trade and manufacture, where female employment rates are two-thirds of the national average in Northumberland and only half in Durham, are more typical. Looking at the figures given for parishes within the region suggests areas where female employment rates were higher, though none reach the average for England.

Table 2.2, *Percentage of Persons Over 20 Years Old Recorded as Occupied within Durham and Northumberland, 1841*

	Percentage of Females Occupied	Percentage of Males Occupied
Durham City	19.83%	78%
Darlington Township	23.42%	93.96%
Gateshead & Gateshead Fell parish	11.57%	94.2%
Jarrow Parish	10.66%	94.45%
Stockton-upon-Tees Parish	18.53%	93.12%
Sunderland Town and Parish	8.1%	96.53%
Newcastle Township and County	20.7%	94.47%
Tynemouth Parish	16.93%	94.3%

Source: Census, 1841

To a certain extent these figures are skewed, as they incorporate the wider parish, where there was a distinction in the gender balance from the central town. The percentage of females employed was highest, as might be expected, in those areas with a large proportion of young females, such as Darlington, Durham City, Tynemouth, Newcastle,

and to a lesser extent Stockton. These figures are still very low, and that of Sunderland almost inexplicable, where little over 400 females were recorded as employed out of over 5,000. Viewed in isolation these figures are puzzling; even more so when cursory comparison is made with later censuses. The figures for 1841 should be treated with a great degree of caution, yet it is difficult to assign all of the difference in low female employment to mis-recording.

The data from 1851 to 1871 and 1881 to 1911 is not directly comparable due to the changing categorisation of wives and daughters. This difference in categorisation can, to an extent, be overcome through an adjustment in the figures for the censuses of 1851-71. It is impossible to add the figures for butcher's wives, shopkeeper's wives, etc, (who were recorded as unemployed after 1881) to the latter figures as the information is not available. These categories can, however, be removed from the census data for 1851, 1861 and 1871. This allows an accurate comparison of figures for the second half of the nineteenth century, but also produces a problem. The deliberate exclusion of women who were known to have worked means that the resultant figures become an underestimate on an underestimate. Also excluded are those women returned as having independent means and those within institutions such as almshouses. These results must then be understood within a comparative context. They may be used with a certain degree of accuracy to look at trends over this period, and differences between areas, though are not intended to represent the actual rates of female employment.<sup>47</sup>

In 1851 15.27% of females were returned as employed in County Durham, 19.96% in Northumberland, and 26.74% in Great Britain. Though figures from 1841 and

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<sup>47</sup> The figures in the following section are amended in this way from the relevant census, and relate to females at all ages, unless otherwise stated.

1851 are inaccurate, the trend of below average employment, most marked in Durham, remains. In 1851, the percentage of females over the age of twenty employed within the principal towns of the North East are as follows: Durham City, 35%; Newcastle-upon-Tyne borough, 27.32%; Tynemouth borough, 27.32%; Sunderland borough, 20.16%; South Shields, 20.08%; and, Gateshead borough, 18.9%. Although the figures are highest in areas identified as containing a large number of young females, only those for Durham City are above the average for Great Britain of 33.6%. Again, these figures by incorporating the wider borough may distort the actual rates of female employment experienced within the central towns, and the figures from Durham, which concentrate on a smaller area, may reflect this. To put these figures into context the borough of Preston, in the North West, recorded female employment rates amongst those over twenty years of age at over 48% in 1851.

Table 2.3 *Percentage of Females Returned as Occupied in each Urban Sanitary Districts of which the Population exceeds 50,000, 1881 and 1891*

	1881	1891*
Sunderland	15.55%	16.56%
South Shields	14.13%	15.72%
Gateshead	14.85%	15.97%
Newcastle	21.50%	22.08%

Sources: Census 1881 and 1891. \*The data in the 1891 census regarding female employment is given regarding those over ten years of age. The figure for all females has been obtained by using the population totals given in each sanitary district.

As Table 2.3 shows, although there is some expansion in the percentage of females employed at the end of the century, there is a continuing pattern of low employment amongst females, especially in County Durham. The figures regarding all females can obscure certain trends, as it includes a large proportion of young babies and children. In 1891 figures regarding the employment of women is only given for females over the age of ten, as opposed to twenty years and above in 1851, and for urban sanitary districts rather than boroughs, although they are of a similar size. They can still provide some useful information. In Newcastle 29.3% of females over the age of ten were in employment; Sunderland, 22.4%; Gateshead, 21.8%; and South Shields, 21.5%. These figures would seem initially to represent an increase over 1851, and though all are above the figure for Middlesbrough, 19.77%, they are below similar sized districts such as Sheffield, 29.48%, and York, 31.7%. It would be expected that a large proportion of females aged ten to fifteen would not be engaged in employment that was likely to have been recorded within the census and that this might therefore distort these figures. However, it is also the case that the figures from 1851, in excluding those of working age but under twenty years old, might fail to account for a significant section of working females: forty per cent of females aged fifteen to nineteen worked in the cotton industry alone within Lancashire.<sup>48</sup> Table 2.4 compares amended figures from 1851 to those of 1891. The figures from 1851 have been revised to include a rough estimate of the percentage of females working between the ages of ten and twenty. These have been arrived at by taking the percentage of female workers within that age range from a county level and applying that rate of employment to the same age range at district level. This

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<sup>48</sup> John. K. Walton, 'The North West', in Thompson (ed.), *Cambridge Social History of Britain*, vol. i, p. 363.

assumes an unlikely level of correlation between the figures at county and district level. As was seen in Chapter One, it would be expected that female employment rates were higher in towns than the surrounding areas. As such these figures should be approached as informed estimates.

Table 2.4 *Estimated Percentage of Females Ten Years of Age and Upwards Returned as Occupied, 1851 and 1891*

	1851	1891
Sunderland	21.31%	22.40%
South Shields	21.10%	21.50%
Gateshead	20.63%	21.80%
Newcastle	30.49%	29.30%

Source: Census 1851 and 1891

Allowing for a degree of underestimation with the 1851 figures, there seems to have been little change in the rates of female occupation in these areas across this period. There may even have been a decrease in the percentage of females employed in Newcastle, during this period of rapid industrial change in Northumberland. Although there was general growth in Newcastle, much of it was focused in districts such as at Elswick where almost the entire population was reliant upon one male dominated industry, in this case shipbuilding. As a whole though the overall rates of female employment in these areas in 1891 had changed very little since 1851. For Durham the rate was just under 15% at 1891, and for Northumberland just over 20%. The static nature of female employment rates can be seen further in the data relating specifically to married women. These figures again exclude the wives recorded as working alongside their husbands in 1851; an

adjustment is especially important here. Historians have compared the figures from 1851 with those from the end of the century without adjustment, concluding there to have been a decline in the employment opportunities open to married women in this period.<sup>49</sup>

Table 2.5 *Percentage of Married Women Recorded as Occupied, 1851 and 1911*

	1851	1911
Durham	3.9%	3.4%
Northumberland	4.4%	4.1%

Source: Census 1851, 1911

As is clear from Table 2.5, not only was there a low rate of married female employment by the end of this period, it had changed little since mid-century. In comparison, at 1851 the percentage of married women employed in England and Wales was just under 14%, falling to 10% by 1911.<sup>50</sup> In Lancashire the rate falls from 22% to 18%.<sup>51</sup> Although there was some decline nationally, it is not as marked as the decline from the un-amended figures of 25% in 1851 and 10% in 1911 suggests.<sup>52</sup> The pattern of under-average employment amongst married women seems to have been established prior to Northumberland's major industrial takeoff, and at least coincided with that of Durham. Figures from 1901, although relating to married and widowed women, suggest that the greater propensity to work amongst females in Northumberland is related to opportunities

<sup>49</sup> This assumes that women did not make an active choice to remove themselves from the workforce.

<sup>50</sup> These are amended figures.

<sup>51</sup> John McKay, 'Married Women and Work in Nineteenth Century Lancashire: The Evidence of the 1851 and 1861 Census Reports', *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), pp. 25-37.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

within agricultural employments. The exodus of males from rural to urban areas seems to have benefited those women that remained in terms of employment.

Table 2.6 *Percentage of Females Aged Upwards of Ten Years Recorded as Occupied in Aggregates of Urban and Rural Areas, 1901*

	Unmarried	Married or Widowed
Durham: Urban Areas	35%	6%
Northumberland: Urban Areas	40%	7%
Durham: Rural Areas	26%	4%
Northumberland: Rural Areas	42%	6%

Source: Census, 1901

As table 2.6 shows, there is only a marginal difference between the recorded occupation rates amongst unmarried females in the urban areas of Northumberland and Durham and this difference may be accounted for in part by the higher rates of employment in Newcastle. The rural areas of Durham are most closely associated in this period with male dominated mining communities, whilst those of Northumberland, apart from a few areas in the Southern part of the region, were mostly agricultural. Widowhood often entailed a return, if they had ever left, to paid employment. That the figures for married and widowed women are only slightly higher than those for married women alone would suggest a lack of employment opportunities. This is reaffirmed by the figures collated by Ellen Jordan which place Durham and Northumberland, in 1871, as the regions with the lowest rates of employment amongst women aged fifteen to nineteen, in England.<sup>53</sup> Clara Collet, reporting to the Board of Trade on the national employment of women and

<sup>53</sup> Jordan, 'Female Unemployment in England and Wales', Table 3, p. 182.



girls in 1894, placed Sunderland, South Shields and Gateshead within the lowest five areas for the employment of females in the same age bracket. Middlesbrough came out the lowest, at almost twice the rate of unemployment for England and Wales.<sup>54</sup>

As a measure of the actual number of females in any employment during the nineteenth century the occupational census is unreliable. It can be put to best use in providing an overview of patterns and changes. The above discussion has brought out some of the differences within the region. Women in urban areas were more likely to be employed in Northumberland than County Durham, and the mixed and vibrant economy of central Newcastle seems to be key in explaining this difference. In rural areas the percentage of female employment was higher again in Northumberland than Durham, where rural areas were, as outlined in Chapter One, increasingly dominated by colliery employment. One must bear in mind that the census is consistent in recording rates of female employment considerably below average within the North East in this period and suggests that there may have been many women who would have taken paid employment up at various points in their married lives had it been available. Although, as will be discussed, male wages were high, individual cases of ill-fortune and male unemployment would have brought periods of poverty to families. Perhaps in this context it is more useful to talk of female worklessness rather than unemployment.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Clara Elizabeth Collet, *Report by Miss Collet on the Statistics of Employment of Women and Girls* (London, 1894), p. 20-3. These figures are also quoted in Jordan, 'Female Unemployment in England and Wales', Table 4, p. 184.

<sup>55</sup> Although current use of this phrase is often unfairly characterised as a politically correct substitute for 'unemployment', the term 'worklessness' nevertheless captures something of the nature of female unemployment in this period. It is perhaps best summed up, in a different context, by Rachel Spence: 'Unemployment is a temporary phenomenon: you may lose your job or fail to get one, but you are still actively part of the labour market .... Workless people, however, are out of the labour market completely.' *The Independent*, 23 Jan 2003.

## *Patterns of Marriage*

This section examines the impact that conditions of employment in the North East had upon patterns of marriage before going on to investigate standards of livings. Differences in marriage rates are explored not only between Northumberland and County Durham, but between areas within these counties. Only a very small number of married women were engaged in paid employment. As such, it might seem a fair assumption that male wages represented the income of a family, but this would reflect only a partial understanding of how women contributed to higher standards of living within their families. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the manner by which women could shop for bargains and make male wages stretch further, the ways in which women supplemented both the monetary and non-monetary income of their households will be explored in relation to how such actions were understood.<sup>56</sup> Even for the most impoverished married woman, undertaking paid employment may not have been the most rational option available to them.

Broadly speaking, the rate of marriage in England declined across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the peak of the late eighteenth century, although change was slower in the last half of this period than the first: increasingly men and women were delaying marriage. Habakkuk has argued that the most prominent force in reducing the average age of marriage was urbanisation.<sup>57</sup> Some qualifications must be added to this, especially in the case of Durham and Northumberland. Whilst in general patterns of urbanisation impacted upon early nuptiality, the urban centres of the North

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<sup>56</sup> More importantly, given the individual nature of the endeavours that women might make in 'shopping around' no regional pattern distinct from elsewhere could be established.

<sup>57</sup> H. J. Habakkuk, *Population Growth and Economic Development since 1750* (Leicester, 1971), p. 46.

East did not necessarily reflect this; patterns of employment are the more consequential force. By the mid-nineteenth century, the average age at first marriage in England and Wales was just over twenty five years of age, though it was a little lower for women.<sup>58</sup> Although fluctuating, the average age at marriage rose slowly over the second half of the century, whilst the marriage rate also fell.<sup>59</sup> This pattern was replicated in the North East, though from a lower base, whilst there remained a much greater propensity to early marriage within the region. The economic and demographic conditions of the region would lead to the expectation that not only would there have been a considerable motivation to marry but that the vast majority of men and women would eventually do so. Similar economic conditions to the North East existed in Preston, where high wages allowed an early independence amongst males. Michael Anderson has discussed the high propensity of early marriage in Preston, as compared to the surrounding rural areas, and the figures he provides for 1851 are detailed in Table 2.7. These are contrasted to the figures for the entirety of County Durham and Northumberland at this time, therefore including areas within this region where the tendency towards early marriage may have been less pronounced.

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Woods, *The Demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Ogle, 'On Marriage Rates and Marriage Ages', p. 272.

Table 2.7 *Percentage of Females Ever Married, Categorised by Age, in County Durham, Northumberland, Preston and England and Wales, 1851*

Age Group	County Durham	Northumberland	Preston	England & Wales
15-19	4	3	3	3
20-24	46	30	29	31
25-34	76	67	64	68
35-44	88	82	84	86
45-54	90	85	90	87
55-64	91	85	92	89
65-74	90	86	94	89
75 and over	90	87	90	89

*Source:* Census 1851; Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), p.133. Figures for County Durham, Northumberland and England and Wales are rounded to the nearest whole. Figures for England and Wales in 1851 taken from data for that year contained within the 1861 census

As Table 2.7 shows, County Durham stands out as a region where early marriage was normal and frequent. At every age group the percentage of married females is above the average for England and Wales, Northumberland and higher than Preston – a much smaller area known for its high marriage rates – for those under forty-five years of age. The high proportion of women ever married in the older age ranges would suggest that the high propensity to marry was not a new phenomenon to Durham at mid-century. In Northumberland those aged under thirty-five are seen to have followed the national trends of marriage fairly closely, whilst in the older age range marriage seems to have

been a slightly less frequent occurrence than was average. In 1851 Northumberland had not yet entered its period of greatest industrial growth and many people lived in rural settlements. These figures may then reflect a core of older middle- and upper-class women for whom marriage had been neither necessary nor desirable and who were able to support themselves fully.<sup>60</sup> This is thrown into doubt by the figures relating to Northumbrian men who never married, where there is a corresponding and above average tendency towards bachelorism in the older age ranges not evident in the figures from Durham. Although it could be argued that such a situation had arisen whereby men and women earned enough individually to live independently, it would appear rather that this circumstance arose through a lack of opportunities to marry. This was probably less related to affording marriage than actually meeting a potential partner. Although hiring fairs brought a huge number of people together, men and women were frequently hired in units pre-determined by themselves, and the opportunities to widen their circle of social acquaintances would have been few and far between on the numerous sparsely populated and widely dispersed farms of Northumberland. The system of bondage (described in Chapter Four) may have assisted in this context, but the hiring of strangers to work alongside and within the family unit was greatly resisted towards the end of the nineteenth century. The figures relating to specific districts within the region reveal much about these marriage trends and the connection with employment.

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<sup>60</sup> On this see, Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London, 1985).

Table 2.8 *Percentage of Unmarried Persons Aged 20 Years and Upwards in the Districts and Unions and County Durham and Northumberland, 1851*

County Durham	Male	Female	Northumberland	Male	Female
Darlington	28.5	31.5	Newcastle	35.3	29.1
Stockton	33.8	22.8	Tynemouth	32.0	20.9
Auckland	32.1	18.6	Castle Ward	35.8	32.1
Teesdale	33.6	31.0	Hexham	36.3	32.9
Weardale	37.1	23.6	Haltwhistle	44.7	29.3
Durham	33.0	23.3	Bellingham	41.7	37
Easington	29.2	16.2	Morpeth	38.5	33.4
Houghton-le-Spring	25.8	19.7	Alnwick	32.4	34.2
Chester-le-Street	29.7	21.5	Belford	33.0	35.3
Sunderland	29.2	21.1	Berwick	31.0	30.6
South Shields	30.6	20.9	Glendale	35.5	38.7
Gateshead	29.1	22.7	Rothbury	43.3	39.5
<b>Average for England and Wales</b>				<b>30.3</b>	<b>28.3</b>

Source: Census, 1851.

Here, it can be seen that in County Durham the two areas at which the number of females who had never married was above the national average were centres of textile

production.<sup>61</sup> This trend at Darlington and at Barnard Castle, within Teesdale, suggests that there were a number of women resident in these areas who would have been able to support themselves independently and so for whom early marriage was not a priority.<sup>62</sup> It may well have been the case here that women were attracted to work in these areas from predominantly mining and agricultural regions where employment was more limited: in other words, there was an element of choice to their single status. In all the other areas of Durham (Table 2.8) the figures regarding unmarried females are significantly below the national average, though the male figures are around or above the national average. Here the balance of population in mining districts can help explain this difference. In an area such as Easington there were over 650 more men than women over the age of twenty and 1,615 bachelors to 801 spinsters. That is, less than 50% of bachelors could have hoped to marry a woman from the local area at this time, assuming that all spinsters would eventually marry and that all men had a sufficient wage to do so. In areas of Northumberland the reverse was often the case. In Glendale, a purely agricultural district, there were almost 600 more women than men, and just under 80% of spinsters for whom a bachelor might be found in the locality. Whilst the demographic conditions in some of these rural areas impacted upon marriage, at Morpeth and Newcastle it seems certain that many women chose to delay marriage. Both of these areas provided employment and a degree of independence for women, whilst, unlike Darlington and Barnard Castle, there were not only more men than women over the age of twenty in the population, but more bachelors than spinsters – over a thousand in Newcastle and nearly

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter One, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> Though, as Louise Tilley and Joan Scott point out, many women may have contributed their wages towards the income of their family: Louise Tilley and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (London, 1987).

three hundred in Morpeth. There was then a great degree of variation within the region in 1851 despite the overall trends for marriage in Northumberland and Durham, which remained high to the end of this period.

Table 2.9 *Percentage of Females Ever Married, Categorised by Age in County Durham (1), Northumberland (2), and England and Wales (3), 1861, 1881, 1901*

	1861			1881			1901		
Age Group	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
15-19	5.69	3.35	3.08	5.31	3.24	2.55	2.85	2.32	1.55
20-24	46.64	33.69	33.63	47.87	34.33	33.46	39.23	32.41	27.41
25-34	80.96	70.16	69.99	83.25	72.21	70.79	76.78	69.16	66.02
35-44	90.39	84.16	84.21	92.52	86.07	84.65	89.56	84.1	81.47
45-54	91.89	86.52	88.08	93.85	87.69	88.10	93.23	88.26	86.36

Source: Censuses 1861, 1881, 1901.

As Table 2.9 shows, County Durham as a whole retained a high propensity towards marriage amongst females across this period – especially in the younger age groups – whilst following the national trend of delaying marriage. It is interesting to note in regard to the figures from Northumberland that, apart from those in the age group fifteen to nineteen, there is very little movement between the figures across the period in this table. There seems to have been greater tendency towards marriage in the period between 1851 and 1861, coinciding with the period of fastest growth in southern Northumberland,



which was consolidated in the following decades. The lower predilection for marriage amongst females under twenty years of age in 1901 is further reflected within the older age groups in County Durham, though the figures here are still substantially above average. This is likely to have arisen through a combination of factors. In the youngest age category the slight widening of opportunities within some trades for female employment would have impacted upon the decision to marry. More importantly the dislocation of male-dominated trades in the decade prior to 1901 would have reduced the number of young men who would have felt secure on entering marriage that they would be able to provide for their family. The medical officer of Newcastle noted in his reports the close link between the prosperity of trade in the region and the marriage rates, documenting in 1890 the 'increased activity in the *marriage market*' as a 'pleasing feature of the revival of trade.'<sup>63</sup> The decline in Durham may reflect that, for some, marriage was less viable in this last period due to the social expectation that male workers upon marriage would be able to fully support their family. The greatest differences between the figures of Durham for 1881 and 1901 are in those aged under thirty five, who would have come to a marriageable age during a period of economic uncertainty in the male trades of heavy industry; the areas in which these trades were concentrated offered little employment for women to compensate for this uncertainty. There remained, however, a great deal of disparity in the marriage rate within the region.

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<sup>63</sup> TWAS, Library, Reports of the Medical Officer of Newcastle, 1888-93, '1890 Report', p. 7.

Table 2.10 *Percentage of Women Ever Married Within the North East, aged 15-54, in 1881 and 1891*

	1881					1891				
	15-	20-	25-	35-	45-	15-	20-	25-	35-	45-
<b>County Durham</b>	5.31	47.87	83.25	92.52	93.85	4.02	43.33	79.61	91.50	93.88
Darlington	2.06	33.83	71.03	88.27	89.23	1.32	27.13	66.61	85.3	89.91
Stockton	6.36	46.28	83.11	91.98	93.42	4	41.84	79.14	90.25	92.69
Durham	6.01	47.89	81.98	91.82	92.47	3.57	41.72	77.72	90.07	92.93
Easington	7.08	56.88	88.12	94.73	95.89	4.94	55.94	85.69	94.31	95.47
Sunderland	5.03	94.12	81.41	91.54	93.36	4.05	42.08	78.21	90.93	94.08
South Shields	5.99	52.69	87.59	91.76	95.54	4.44	46.31	83.89	93.99	95.39
Gateshead	4.66	45.74	83.45	91.97	93.38	3.68	43.72	80.07	91.43	93.76
Middlesbrough	5.96	53.81	87.88	96.12	97.09	4.69	48.97	83.86	94.84	97.26
<b>Northumberland</b>	3.24	34.33	72.21	86.07	87.69	2.46	33.48	70.03	85.36	88.7
Newcastle	3.48	35.22	73.83	88.13	89.45	2.86	35.17	72.97	87.37	91.04
Tynemouth	4.65	45.81	82.71	92.45	95.28	3.62	35.17	78.68	90.97	93.59
Hexham	2.45	26.83	62.97	80.64	84.06	0.89	19.06	54.28	77.18	84.03
Morpeth	4.23	38.73	77.3	86.63	90.29	3.76	39.8	73.94	87.52	88.32
Alnwick	1.23	21.05	59.42	78.19	81.69	1.25	24.46	77.93	81.61	81.48
Glendale	0.17	12.58	50	71.77	74.67	0.54	12.27	45.85	73.03	77.77

Source: Censuses 1881, 1891.

Table 2.10 shows some of this variation between areas, and that the decline in marriage rates began in earnest during this period. Whilst areas such as Darlington had previously

begun to follow more closely the national patterns of marriage, coinciding with the reduction in out-work performed in the textile industry, there remained colliery areas such as Easington with rates of marriage amongst those under twenty at over twice the national average. The rate of marriage within this group had fallen by almost a third by 1891, suggesting that, although the rate remained well above the national average, the economic reliance upon coal in that area had resulted in a slowing down of early marriage as wages, though high, became less secure. For example, Wheatley Hill Colliery had closed in 1884 (although it reopened in 1890) and other collieries, such as Thornley Colliery, were partly closed. Both Castle Eden Colliery and Hutton Henry Colliery closed during the 1890s; the population fell by two-thirds in this area between the 1891 and 1901 censuses. At Middlesbrough there was a similar rise in the age at which women first married, reflecting the decline in wages after the boom period of the early 1870s.<sup>64</sup>

From the figures relating to the percentage of women ever married at Northumberland those of Glendale are immediately obvious as extremely low, especially amongst those under thirty five. Here in Northumberland the system of bondage had by this time developed into an almost exclusively familial enterprise, with the consequence that many daughters entered into farm work alongside their relatives. It must be remembered when dealing with these figures that as percentages they mask the extent to which young men and women moved away from such purely agricultural areas, a trend exacerbated by the completion of the railway from Wooler, Glendale, in the late 1880s. This contrast between the rural and urban areas of Northumberland is clearly evident

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<sup>64</sup> See A. A. Hall, 'Wages, Earnings and Real Earnings in Teesside: A Re-Assessment of the Ameliorist Interpretation of Living Standards in Britain, 1870-1914', *International Review of Social History* (1981), pp. 202-29.

even towards the end of our period, despite the convergence towards national trends that had occurred in the preceding decades. Much of this can be attributed to the economic structure of these areas.

Table 2.11 *Percentage of Women Ever Married in the Aggregate of Urban and Rural Districts of County Durham, Northumberland and England and Wales Categorised by Age, 1901*

	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74
<b>County Durham</b>	2.85	39.23	76.78	89.56	93.23	94.61	94.51
Urban	2.89	38.96	76.58	89.59	93.36	94.72	94.62
Rural	2.75	40.01	77.3	89.47	92.89	94.31	94.24
<b>Northumberland</b>	2.32	32.41	69.16	84.1	88.26	89.59	88.92
Urban	2.54	34.78	71.63	85.96	90.07	91.45	90.61
Rural	1.54	22.63	59.23	77	87.72	83.77	84.26
<b>England and Wales</b>	1.55	27.41	66.02	81.47	86.36	88.31	88.88
Urban	1.62	27.89	66.36	81.62	86.46	88.17	88.37
Rural	1.30	25.30	64.63	80.92	86.09	88.71	90.11

Source: Census, 1891.

As can be seen in Table 2.11, whilst the penetration of heavy industry and coal mining across Durham – in areas categorised as rural as well as urban – resulted in little difference between the percentage of women ever married, in Northumberland the more

traditionally agricultural rural areas presented a contrasting pattern to those in urban areas, whilst falling below the national average for rural districts. This is reflected in the findings of William Ogle from 1890, who found that nationally those women who married miners did so at an earlier age than those who married men engaged in any other occupation. Ogle found that those women who married men engaged in agricultural tasks did so at the oldest average age, 26.91, almost five years later than miner's wives. Just under 83% of women who married miners were under the age of 25, but only 50% of those who married farming men.<sup>65</sup> Although Ogle found that generally the proportion of brides under the age of twenty five was highest in those regions where the proportion of occupied women was high, County Durham is a clear exception. However, the motivating factors to marriage, in County Durham and areas of high female employment, may not have been so dissimilar as the differing conditions of these regions may suggest. As Simon Szreter and Anne Hardy have asserted, in relation to rates of fertility, in regions of low female employment 'there was very little for young women of the proletarian class to do in these communities, either to support themselves or to contribute to their parents' budget. Consequently, they either married relatively young, with financial dependence on their father and brothers, or they left for work elsewhere.'<sup>66</sup> However, they were able to marry early through most of this period because of the high wages that were on offer to male labourers from a relatively young age and for whom independent support of a small family was achievable. In areas elsewhere in the country where the rates of occupied women were high, marriage at an early age was possible

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<sup>65</sup> The occupations considered were miners, textile hands, shoemakers and tailors, artisans, labourers, commercial clerks, shopkeepers and shopmen, farmers, and the professional and independent class. Ogle, 'On Marriage Rates and Marriage Ages', p. 274, Tables F and G.

<sup>66</sup> Simon Szreter and Anne Hardy, 'Urban Fertility and Mortality Patterns', in Martin Daunt (ed), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. iii: 1840-1950 (Cambridge, 2000), p. 657.

because of the combined income of the husband and wife, and were often areas where the average male wage was lower than those available in coal-mining regions such as Durham. This is not to deny that women may have taken much pride in their status within paid employment, rather a recognition that for the vast majority of working-class women in this period there was not a choice between hard paid work or marriage, but of the timing of when hard paid work was entered into and when it was financially viable to enter into marriage and start a family. The higher propensity to marriage in Durham was not just a reflection of a lack of opportunities and a greater proportion of men in the population, but of a region with high male wages where marriage could be entered into early and a decent standard of living maintained. Independence came later to the male labourers in agricultural Northumberland, where marriage prior to securing work as a hind could lead to destitution, and where the trend to work in agriculture as family units was stronger. The rate of marriage in this region was strongly connected to the patterns of employment and the wages on offer to men.

### *Male Wages and the Standard of Living*

There has been much debate as to the reliability of the various estimates of real wages, and consequently living standards, that have been put forward by economic historians. It has frequently been the case that the lack of an alternative index to that put forward by Bowley and Woods has resulted in a reliance upon their approximations. This index has certain shortcomings; for example, the index would be more accurate if it accounted for the consumption of non-essential items and that income levels fluctuated, not only in

periods of localised industrial unrest but through ill-health, short slumps in trade or in fines imposed by employers.<sup>67</sup> There have been some interesting studies into the living standards of men and women using records of height amongst criminals which have done much on a national level to deepen our understanding of how resources may have been distributed within families. These studies conclude that men received the lion's share of food available within families.<sup>68</sup> This research has been supplemented by localised studies into standards of living that have corrected some of the patterns discussed on a national level for specific areas.<sup>69</sup> It is not the intention of this section to add in an in-depth manner to this research, which has served to moderate the broad acceptance that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had been a period of stagnation or decline in wages followed by a slow rise into the late Victorian age, which witnessed a marked improvement in overall standards of living.<sup>70</sup> Rather, the evidence acquired in relation to the North East by Bowley, the Board of Trade and others will be examined as figures that were estimated and compared to the similarly estimated data taken nationally and in other regions. Here, the trends of marriage and low levels of female employment that have been discussed will be examined in relation to average wages and costs and the extent to

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<sup>67</sup> A.L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom since 1860* (Cambridge, 1937); G. H. Woods, *A History of Wages in the Cotton Industry* (London, 1910). See also, Charles Feinstein, 'A New Look at the Cost of Living, 1870-1914', in James Foreman Peck (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Late Victorian Economy. Essays in Quantitative Economic History, 1860-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 151-79; and, T.V. Jackson, 'British Incomes circa 1800', *Economic History Review* (1999), pp. 257-83.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Nicholas and Deborah Oxley, 'The Living Standards of Women During the Industrial Revolution, 1795-1920', *Economic History Review*, 46 (1993), pp. 723-49; Paul Johnson and Stephen Nicholas, 'Male and Female Living Standards in England and Wales, 1812-1857: Evidence from Criminal Height Records', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), pp. 470-81.

<sup>69</sup> See for example, R.S. Neale, 'The Standard of Living, 1780-1844: A Regional and Class Study', *Economic History Review*, 19 (1966), pp. 590-606; Hall, 'Wages, Earnings and Real Earnings in Teesside'; and, Elizabeth Roberts, 'Working-Class Standards of Living in Barrow and Lancaster, 1890-1914', *Economic History Review*, 30 (1977), pp. 306-21.

<sup>70</sup> N.F.R. Crafts, 'Trends in Real Wages in Britain, 1750-1913', *Explorations in Economic History*, 31 (1994), pp. 176-194; Sara Horell and Jane Humphries, 'Old Questions, New Data, and Alternative Perspectives: Families' Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 52 (1992), pp. 849-80.

which it made economic sense for women in the North East not to enter paid employment. Given the low levels of female employment within the region it can be assumed that the level of wages recorded, reliant solely upon figures from male employment, are a fairly accurate reflection of general family wages, at least as far as this can be ascertained. This provides us with figures relating to earned monetary income, but it does neglect sources of family income, through self-provision, charity or poor relief, that may have served to offset substantially periods of variation in male earnings.<sup>71</sup> These aspects will be discussed further below.

By the beginning of this period male wages in the North East were already comparably high. As Hunt has indicated, in the 1760s agricultural workers in the region were amongst the lowest-paid in England, but by 1790 the situation had reversed. He goes on to describe male labourers within the North East by the Edwardian period as a body of men that stood to receive amongst the highest wages in Britain in almost every trade.<sup>72</sup> However, this is a simplification of trends within the region, especially within the non-agricultural labour force. Whilst it is true to say that wages in the overwhelming majority of non-agricultural labour were amongst the highest paid in the Edwardian period, trades such as shipbuilding and engineering paid very high wages during the mid-century industrial growth of Northumberland and it was the case that by the early twentieth century some other regions such as on the Clyde and in Belfast had caught up. Although the wages paid in engineering on the Tyne, Wear, and Clyde were equal in 1904, those on the Clyde had grown by 60% since 1860, but those on the Tyne had

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<sup>71</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Old Questions, New Data, and Alternative Perspectives', p. 851.

<sup>72</sup> See E.H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973), *passim*.



grown only by 40% and on the Wear by 34%.<sup>73</sup> In a similar trend, on Teesside the wages of iron-workers in the 1860s were amongst the highest in the country, but the rate of wage growth at Middlesbrough stagnated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Wages in coal mining were exceptionally high at mid-century in Durham and remained so throughout the period. Labourers at Darlington were described as being paid twice that which was paid at Bristol,<sup>75</sup> and even by the early twentieth century the wages available in Durham and Northumberland were twice that paid in Somerset;<sup>76</sup> although here too despite the demand for labour, wages were growing less quickly than they had previously, especially during the 1870s.<sup>77</sup> In other trades, those who worked as builders, carpenters or policemen in the North East received wages that were on par with other areas and rising.<sup>78</sup>

There was then a convergence towards national averages by the end of this period in non-agricultural labour. Whilst in some trades wages rose proportionally quicker than in other areas, the reverse is the case in the dominant industrial trades such as shipbuilding, coalmining and iron and steel work. Here wages, though rising, did so less quickly. As wages rose in other parts of the country the comparable advantage of North East male labourers in heavy industry was dissipated by this convergence towards

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<sup>73</sup> See A.L. Bowley and G.H. Wood, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom during the Nineteenth Century (Part XIV). Engineering and Shipbuilding', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 69 (1906), pp. 148-96.

<sup>74</sup> Hall, 'Wages, Earnings and Real Earnings in Teesside', p. 206.

<sup>75</sup> Pease, *The Diaries of Edward Pease*, p. 302.

<sup>76</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, p. 16, n. 6.

<sup>77</sup> A.L. Bowley, 'Changes in Average Wages (Nominal and Real) in the United Kingdom between 1860 and 1891', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 58 (1895), p.271; Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, pp.16, n.6, 72. See also, Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*. Precise information about coal mining wages for this period is difficult to ascertain as the first major national survey of wages in this trade was not until 1886 and was not followed up for almost thirty years.

<sup>78</sup> See A.L. Bowley, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom During the Last Hundred Years (Part VI). Wages in the Building Trades – English Towns', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 63 (1900), pp. 297-315; Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, *passim*.

national averages. The high wages of these dominant trades at and before mid-century meant many married women may not have seen it as worthwhile to seek work. In many of these areas there was little work on offer and what wages could be gained through charring or casual domestic work may not have been sufficient to cover the costs of paying a neighbour to look after any young children, nor compensate for the long days that would ensue from fulfilling domestic duties as well as those arising from paid employment. For single women most employment that could be found was low paid and did not serve to delay entry into marriage. By the early twentieth century, when wage differences were lower, male wages were still high enough to ensure that even if full time work was on offer it was not a rational choice for most married women to make; though this was of course reinforced by a strong culture of domesticity, especially in the coal-mining districts. In agricultural regions the picture was slightly different. To some extent agricultural workers maintained their advantage in Northumberland due to the system of hiring, though a few regions could match nominal wages paid here by 1910.<sup>79</sup>

In 1790 agricultural wages in Northumberland and Durham were amongst the highest in the country and by the early nineteenth century above the rates paid anywhere else.<sup>80</sup> The years in which agricultural wages in the North East were at their highest coincided with that of high industrial wages in the early 1870s.<sup>81</sup> At this time rates of pay in the North East were over 20s a week at a time when the national average was 14s 10d.

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<sup>79</sup> A.L. Bowley, 'Rural Population in England and Wales: A Study of the Changes of Density, Occupation and Ages', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 77 (1914), p. 645.

<sup>80</sup> See Frederick Purdy, 'On the Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in England and Wales, 1860', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 24 (1861), pp. 328-73, although Purdy fails to fully account for the non-monetary payments of hinds which made up much of their income. See further, Eden, Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor; Or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England* (London, 1797), Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor; Or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England* (London, 1797), Vol. 2, *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> A.L. Bowley, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom During the Last Hundred Years (Part I). Agricultural Wages', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 61 (1898), p. 720-21.

During the 1890s wages of around 17s a week compared to a national average of 13s 5d. Though wages had dropped by the early 1900s they were still the highest in the country and beyond those of Westmorland and Middlesex when the condition of hinds is fully accounted for.<sup>82</sup> The average weekly wages of agricultural men in Durham and Northumberland in 1837 has been given at 12s, compared to a national average of 10s 4d.<sup>83</sup> In a survey of Northumberland the following year the average wage derived from employers was given at an equivalent of 11s a week:

Cash.....£	4	0	0
Corn.....	13	9	0
1000 yards of potatoes, manured, set and taken up.....	1	13	4
Cow's grass in summer, with hay and straw in winter.....	8	0	0
Garden, valued at.....	0	10	0
Cottage, at.....	2	10	0
Coals, leading, at.....	2	0	0
Wife's wages, for 20 days at harvest.....	2	10	0
	34	12	4
Loss by finding bondager.....	6	0	0
	28	12	4

In the case of families who employed a direct female relative as the bondager the £6 would of course not be subtracted. However, even if the lower sum of 11s a week is taken, this is only the income derived directly from the farmer and, although more easily comparable to the rates of wages enjoyed by common labourers elsewhere, disguises the fact that a considerable part of overall income came from 'the profitable application of the hind's capital and his wife's labour, in keeping a cow, feeding pigs, and growing potatoes.' By keeping a cow, feeding two pigs, cultivating a garden and growing

<sup>82</sup> The national wage average is more accurately an average day labourer wage and as such underestimates the difference in earnings between day labourers and those in Northumberland who were hired yearly and enjoyed numerous additional benefits.

<sup>83</sup> Purdy, 'On the Earnings of Agricultural Labourers', p. 342.

potatoes, all common endeavours amongst hinds and their families, the weekly income detailed above may be augmented to an equivalent of at least 15s 6d a week: 'This shews how much may be added to the comforts of an agricultural labourer, without injury to the farmer, by giving him an opportunity of thus employing his little capital and the labour of his family in producing some of the most important articles of food.'<sup>84</sup> It should be borne in mind as well that the above values attributed to corn and potatoes were at prices current in 1838 and that farmers gave hinds a weighed amount rather than an amount equivalent to the monetary values detailed. As such, this contribution could be worth more in certain years and farmers often bought back unused corn at the end of the year. In the case of families with children who could take the place of a paid bondager, as was increasingly the case in the second half of the nineteenth century, annual incomes would be higher. Even in the case of a hind who had no children to work and whose wife only worked directly on the farm at harvest time, and who subsequently had to hire and maintain a bondager, his annual income was said to have been around 40l 17s 10d. Of course, as detailed above, this was not the hind's wage alone but a product of family endeavours. It made little sense for the wife of a hind to work all year round on the farm not only because wages were low, though still higher than female agricultural wages elsewhere, but because through her activities the equivalent of five shillings a week could be added to the family purse. Only at harvest time, when wages rose, was it worthwhile for her to work for cash wages. The family income may have been supplemented by other activities such as beekeeping, and the above account certainly underestimates the

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<sup>84</sup> L. Hindmarsh, 'On the State of Agriculture and Condition of the Agricultural Labourers of the Northern Division of Northumberland', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 1 (1838), pp. 397-414.

contribution that could be made from keeping a cow.<sup>85</sup> It was said by John Grey, an Northumbrian agriculturalist and father of Josephine Butler, that if the 'good wife be a frugal manager' she could sell fifty to one hundred shillings worth of butter, 'besides an ample supply of milk and cheese for use of the family.' The possession of a cow was thought so valuable to the family income that Grey thought many men would not marry without one and that it was the 'first step towards independence that is generally aimed at.'<sup>86</sup> The keeping of poultry could also make a significant contribution to the income of households. At Morpeth in the late nineteenth-century farmers wives arrived by train on Wednesdays and Saturdays to sell eggs, chickens and other goods in the town.<sup>87</sup>

The payment of hinds by free housing and in food stuff, as well as a reliance upon self production, allowed for standards of living to be maintained at a fairly satisfactory level, although illness of livestock and family labourers could severely impact upon this. Despite the levels of relative comfort that could be attained, rural men and women were increasingly attracted to towns and urban centres. Monetary wages were certainly higher in these areas but workers moving from agricultural areas would not necessarily be better off as they would immediately be burdened with the extra costs of housing and foodstuff. A point here should be made about the price of food. Although the costs of different food items changed over the course of the century there is little to suggest that food prices were higher in high-wages areas of the country than in low-wage areas: 'there is no reason to suppose [that] prices varied significantly in different areas nor is there any

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<sup>85</sup> See George Charlton, *The Beekeepers Guide* (Hexham, 1887). He claimed that this enterprise was profitable enough so that even only one good season every five years would cover the costs undertaken and allow a small profit.

<sup>86</sup> Appendage relating to statements by John Grey in, Hindmarsh, 'On the State of Agriculture', pp. 409-412.

<sup>87</sup> NRO, 1666, Typescript Notes of the Recollections of Miss Thompson and Miss Scott About Life in Morpeth.

evidence that this might have been the case.<sup>88</sup> Higher wages could translate into being able to afford more abundant food and necessities of greater quality, or, of course, greater opportunities for drink, tobacco and gambling. Dr Oliver, of Newcastle, estimated that urban workers spent between 50% and 80% of their wages on food, depending upon how much they earned.<sup>89</sup> For the very worst paid, wages were insufficient to meet their needs, especially when the chief breadwinner was a woman whose family had come to temporarily rely upon her labour. An example was given of a woman with two children, one a baby, and a husband who had been unemployed for nine months. Out of her earnings of nine shillings a week, 1s 6d went on the rent of a room, 2s 8d to a woman acting as a nurse, leaving less than 50% of her pay, 4s 10d, to cover food and other necessities. However, this was presented as an unusual case and even semi-skilled male labourers would have earned three times this amount – although the average female wage in most trades was closer to six shillings a week. It does show the costs that might be incurred by female labourers with a small family if they went out to work; in this case a quarter of what was a high wage amongst female labourers in Newcastle at this time went on child care.<sup>90</sup> Apart from food, the other significant outgoing in household expenditure was on rent. There is evidence to show that rents were particularly high in this region, despite housing conditions that were often substantially worse than elsewhere, both in terms of hygiene and overcrowding.<sup>91</sup> They were certainly worse than many of the

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<sup>88</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, p. 84. See also Eden, *The State of the Poor*, *passim*, where a general rise in the price of the necessities of life is described across the country.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Oliver, *The Diet of Toil and its Relation to Wages and Production. A Paper Read at the Congress of Hygiene and Demography, Budapest, 1894* (Newcastle, 1894), p. 23. Bowley estimated the figure at 60%. See Ian Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 20-21.

<sup>90</sup> The person in question worked at white-lead works in Newcastle, a trade which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, TWAS, ACC 184/1/1, John Priced, *Homes for the People! Our Greatest Want and How to Supply it. Together with an Abstract of a Paper on Industrial Dwellings at Newcastle* (Newcastle,

cottages provided by farmers to their labourers and suggests that men and women did not necessarily move to urban areas because of a perception that they would immediately gain a greater amount of dispensable income, but that they might have an opportunity to 'better themselves' and to 'rise in their vocation'.<sup>92</sup> The attractions, distractions and recreations of urban life should not be underestimated either; conspicuous by their absence when trampling the miles of dark and dusty paths, such pleasures were tantalisingly illuminated during the fairs that punctuated the rural calendar at what must have seemed far too infrequent intervals. L. Marion Springall described the free time of a young rural worker:

Home has no attractions for the young labourer. When he goes there tired and chilly he is in the way amidst domestic discomforts; the cottage is small, the children are troublesome and the fire is diminished, the solitary candle is lighted late and extinguished early; he treads on the children amidst an uproar of screams, is perpetually taking his father's chair by the chimney corner, and frequently leaving dirty thumbmarks on the linen his mother is getting up for the squire's lady. If he goes to bed early, his elder brother who sleeps with him, wakes him after an

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1874); TWAS, Library, *Reports of the Medical Officer of Newcastle*; David Adams, *The Housing Question. Better and Cheaper Homes for the People of Newcastle* (Newcastle, 1901); TWAS, D/PH 92, 'Report to the Local Government Board on the Sanitary Circumstances of the Whickham Urban District, with Special Reference to its Housing Accommodation Generally' (London, 1906); and, Bill Lancaster (ed.), *Working Class Housing on Tyneside, 1850-1939* (Whitley Bay, 1994).

<sup>92</sup> William Ogle, 'The Alleged Depopulation of the Rural Districts of England', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 52 (1889), pp. 205-32; Lord Eversley, 'The Decline in Numbers of Agricultural Labourers in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 70 (1907), pp. 267-319. There are numerous reports and pamphlets beyond those cited relating to the condition of working-class dwellings in the North East during this period, that pick up on this point, held at Newcastle Central Library and Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society.

hour with a kick; if late, he is scolded by his mother for disturbing the four children who sleep in the next bed to his own.<sup>93</sup>

Accessibility to urban entertainments, and importantly the hope to materially improve one's condition, could come at a relatively high price. Rents in Newcastle were amongst the highest outside London during the 1880s, and a farmer moving to the town would probably lose out overall when the higher rents and loss of earnings of his family was accounted for.<sup>94</sup> There remained the hope that in urban areas a better paid job could be found. In 1908, the Board of Trade investigation into working-class rents and retail prices was published and although it detailed a degree of disparity within the region, mostly related to rent and cost of fuel, it also showed that whilst the overall cost of living could be expensive in urban areas, higher wages could compensate for this.<sup>95</sup> In the following table London prices are 100.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> L. Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages, 1834-1914* (1836), quoted in Pamela Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (1976; Abingdon, 1995), p.144. See also the comments of Fox, 1893-4, *Royal Commission on Labour*, Glendale.

<sup>94</sup> Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*, p. 91.

<sup>95</sup> Some doubt has been expressed over the exactitude of this data. However, it stands sufficient for comparative purposes. See further, Ian Gazeley, 'The Cost of Living for Urban Workers in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), pp. 207-21; and, Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain*, especially Chapter One.

<sup>96</sup> The category all commodities was calculated from the prices of twenty two types of groceries and coal. As such it does not account for differences in expenditure on some items such as clothes and insurance.



Table 2.12 *Cost of Living in the Industrial Towns of the North East, 1908*

	Rent	All Commodities	Combined Index
Middlesbrough	59	95	88
Stockton	54	99	90
Darlington	58	98	90
Sunderland	59	94	87
South Shields	61	94	87
Jarrow	68	98	94
Gateshead	66	98	92
Newcastle	76	98	94

Source: PP, 1908, 'Report of an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into Working Class rents, Housing and Retail Prices', *passim*.

Although rents could be high, and seem to have risen in proximity to Newcastle, the relatively low cost of fuel in the North East resulted in a combined index of costs substantially lower than that of London and in line with figures from elsewhere in the country.<sup>97</sup> Of course, extra earnings could be consumed within the additional costs of early marriage and child birth. Szreter and Hardy report that even in 1911, when fertility rates had begun to fall in some urban communities, towns such as Gateshead, South Shields, Sunderland, Newcastle and Middlesbrough displayed high fertility levels. The

<sup>97</sup> See Gazeley, 'The Cost of Living for Urban Workers', Table 2, p. 211. The tendency towards regional differences in rents is confirmed in, Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP), 1913, lxvi, *Cost of Living of the Working Classes. Report of an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into Working-Class Rents and Retail Prices Together with the Rates of Wages in Certain Occupations in Industrial Towns in the United Kingdom*.

same though could be said of urban areas in Lancashire, the Black Country and South Wales.<sup>98</sup>

Male wages were the dominant input into the family income and the concentration of heavy industry in the region impacted upon the rates and age of marriage. The high rates paid for male labour mitigated against the need for monetary contributions from the paid employment of women. However, although the overwhelming majority of married women and a large percentage of single women were 'unemployed' this did not stop them from contributing to the family purse and they played a crucial role in maintaining decent standards of living within the household and in 'making do'. The lack of female employment in this region did not have a negative impact upon standards of living. This is not to argue that high male wages were a consequence of the lack of female employment on offer.<sup>99</sup> To do so would ignore the evidence from areas such as Lancaster, Manchester and London, where high male wages coincided with relatively high levels of female employment. Rather, the extent to which high wages were available to very young men, most especially in County Durham, had a direct impact upon decisions of marriage. For the majority of women in these areas it made sense to marry early. The alternative, moving to an urban area, where they would be a stranger and to work for a pittance within a trade they might have been ill-trained to enter, would have entailed a drop in their standard of living; although undoubtedly some women embraced this risk. In rural Northumberland, where independence came later to males working in agriculture early marriage was not an option, especially when daughters were

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<sup>98</sup> Szreter and Hardy, 'Urban Fertility and Mortality Patterns', pp. 651-55.

<sup>99</sup> It is also not the case that perceived female reliance upon men resulted in lower female wages and supports to an extent Joyce Burnette's wider argument that women were underpaid because of their assumed dependence on male household head.

increasingly called upon to work with her family on agricultural tasks, both as a bondager and as a casual labourer. In urban areas the picture is a little more mixed. On the outskirts of Newcastle and Sunderland, areas dominated by shipbuilding and engineering might replicate the marriage patterns of coalmining Durham, but in the centres, where male wages could be lower and more casual, and where some opportunities for female employment occurred, the marriage rate reflected more the national average. However, work did not mean independence for the vast majority of women in this period, but survival. Destitution enforced many women to seek ways in which to contribute to the family income, but paid employment was not the only option available to them.

### CHAPTER THREE

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## STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

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In almost every case which I have made the subject of inquiry, I find that they, the unfortunate victims of prostitution, could not continue in their course of infamy but for drink. They take it to make them bold and imprudent, after which they become callous under its influence. The drink, and the facilities for drinking, present the greatest difficulties to female reformation.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter Two showed that female employment rates in the region were generally low, especially among married women, but that high male wages were able to bridge any gap in family income. There were of course times at which the male wage would not have been sufficient, or present; even families in which women regularly worked would experience periods of poverty and there were ways in which goods and money could be secured other than through 'formal' employment. This could contribute significantly to the survival of family members or single woman during times of hardship, although it is difficult to include with accuracy these activities with standards of living. It is not the intention of this section to examine in depth the ways in which women contributed through activities related to general domestic tasks. These wider domestic tasks were frequently essential, though commonplace and virtually unrecorded. It would be an almost impossible task to assess any pattern that might distinguish the North East from

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<sup>1</sup> The matron of Newcastle penitentiary, quoted in James Rewcastle, *Newcastle As It Is: Reviewed in its Moral Aspects, Social State, and Sanitary Condition, (Elucidatory of Mr Stephen's Criminal Returns.) in an Address by the Committee of Newcastle-upon-Tyne Temperance Society* (Newcastle, 1854), p. 14.

other regions. Instead the focus shall be fixed upon the 'informal' economic contributions of charity, petty crime and prostitution, though there are here too problems with the evidence. Much of the evidence originates from middle-class contemporaries who often had a distinct view of the working classes; note the matron, who is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, cites drink rather than poverty as the problem to be addressed.

It was frequently the rational choice of married women not to work, especially in this region where the lack of employment on offer to women in most areas could only have added to the cost, in further travel time and low wages, of engaging in paid employment. Joanna Burke has pointed out the frequency with which working class women questioned by the *Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture* (1867) quoted variations of the saying that 'between the woman that works and the woman that doesn't there is only 6d to choose at the year's end, and she that stays at home has it.'<sup>2</sup> Although in the case of agricultural regions there may have been more opportunities for married women to contribute directly to the household income through domestic based tasks, the general point holds true. The costs that might arise from undertaking regular paid employment could serve to undermine the economic reasons for doing so, especially as there would often be no corresponding relief from domestic duties.<sup>3</sup> It is also the case that married women's work was increasingly looked down upon. The investigators of married women's work in Newcastle from the Women's Industrial Council experienced great difficulty in finding married women wage-earners:

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Burke, 'Housewifery in Working-Class England 1860-1914', *Past and Present*, 143 (1994), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> See the description given by Bert Coombes, a coal miner from an agricultural background, of his mother's work never finishing, in B.L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands* (London, 1939); p. 12. See further, M.L. Davies, *Maternity. Letters from Working Women* (1915; London, 1978); and, Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (London, 1913).

'They prefer to keep their work as secret as possible .... So effectively do they hide themselves that the general idea amongst men trade-unionists is that there are no married women wage-earners'. In general though the male trade-unionists were right, there were few married women workers, as the evidence from the investigators showed. All of the women interviewed worked out of necessity, not choice, and had no suggestion for improving their position beyond 'employment for their men-folk.'<sup>4</sup> However, despite the element of rational choice that may be attributed to women who do not seek employment, it must be remembered that the household economy was not static. In general, it may have been rational for women to not work, even when in general poverty, but in times of extreme family hardship this would not have been the case.<sup>5</sup> This does not necessarily mean that women would have been led to engage themselves in paid employment. In the matter of individual cases of extreme hardship, where illness or accident may have left a husband incapable of working, the response of wives was often to spend the period of his rehabilitation acting as a full time nurse to him. Collections amongst his work colleagues and contributions from sick clubs would often supplement any savings to cover periods when he was incapable of working.<sup>6</sup> During periods of prolonged unemployment through slumps in trade, it may have made sense for wives to find paid employment, but little may have been on offer: in 1902 at Sunderland it was reported that male unemployment was at 50% and that 'when a foreigner (foreign ship) does come in, there

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<sup>4</sup> Annie Abram, 'Newcastle', in Clementina Black (ed.), *Married Women's Work. Being the Report of an Enquiry Undertaken by the Women's Industrial Council* (London, 1915), pp. 195-203.

<sup>5</sup> Bell estimates that around one third of workers investigated at Middlesbrough could be considered as living in poverty. Florence Bell, *At the Works. A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907; London 1985).

<sup>6</sup> See example of Jack D. and family in Bell, *At the Works*, p. 174-75. Such responses can also be seen reflected in popular songs, such as 'The Honest Working Man', in Anon, *The Tyneside Sang Beuk* (Newcastle, 1856).

are as many men applying for work as would lift her'.<sup>7</sup> In such cases of general distress there were numerous charitable bodies that sought to relieve the worst cases of poverty. The Dunn Street Mission at Newcastle became a centre for the relief of distress in the Scotswood Road district during the 1892 engineers strike, giving breakfast meals to those families effected.<sup>8</sup> As elsewhere in the country, there were numerous charitable bodies that ran only during the winter months when poor weather might throw unskilled labourers out of work. A soup kitchen was set up in the winter months of Newcastle in 1812 and ran during the worst winters throughout the century. At Jarrow during the distress of 1886, soup and bread was supplied two or three times a week to almost 3,300 people.<sup>9</sup> The records of the Hexham soup kitchen includes a list of the recipients of soup, just under a third of whom can be identified as female.<sup>10</sup>

Poverty was not synonymous with an inability to control one's life. There were choices that could be made in the obtaining and use of resources for single, married and widowed women. However, there was much that could not be controlled. Not only did most women have to balance the household budget relying upon male wages to form the bulk of income, but poor weather, illness or death could wipe out earnings or savings. Family may not always have been on hand to turn to in support.<sup>11</sup> The use of 'strategy' in the title of this chapter would suggest that there was an element of choice in the actions

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<sup>7</sup> London School of Economics Archives, Women's Co-operative Guild Collection, Coll Misc 268, Microfilm 69, 'Volume Four. Sunderland Scrapbook, 1902-1903'. See further, Alan Kidd, 'Charity Organisation and the Unemployed in Manchester c. 1870-1914', *Social History*, 9 (1984), pp. 45-66.

<sup>8</sup> TWAS, CH/CNE/27, Dunn Street Mission, nd, c. 1894.

<sup>9</sup> *Shields Gazette*, 5 February 1886.

<sup>10</sup> TWAS, CHX3/1/1-2, Newcastle General Soup Kitchen; NRO 604/1, Committee Minute Book of Hexham Soup Kitchen, 1841-1880.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of these issues see, Alan Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England* (Basingstoke, 1997); R. Mitchison and P. Roebuck (eds.), *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland, 1500-1939* (Edinburgh, 1988); and, S. King and A. Tomkins (eds.), *The Poor in England, 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003).

of the women that are to be discussed. This is certainly the case, though the range of options open for individuals to take were narrow. Although historians have stressed the agency the poor might exert in the face of extreme poverty, the actions they took often represented 'more an expression of despair ... than the triumph of individual ingenuity'.<sup>12</sup> Some of this can be seen in poor law applications where 'the labouring poor could effectively express their needs, pursue their interests and establish their claims'.<sup>13</sup> A sample from Newcastle in 1836 reveals not only that applicants were predominantly female, but that they would frequently assert their circumstances and supposed rights firmly. Many applicants declared that they 'only solicit relief for my children.' Others were forthright in their refusal to give up possessions and enter the workhouse: 'It would be an act of oppression on the part of the vestry. In the event of my death my children ought to have my household goods.'<sup>14</sup>

Unsurprisingly, many of the charitable organisations in this period operated under the auspices of religious bodies, though they offered differing degrees of indoctrination in return for assistance. The Gateshead District Visiting Society was founded to promote the spiritual welfare of the local poor by supplying them with the 'means of religious instruction and engaging them to attend the public worship of God'.<sup>15</sup> However, almost seven times as much money was spent on providing food, bedding and clothing for those visited than in supplying books and tracts.<sup>16</sup> Many families would have feigned an interest in religion, even if they were not eventually converted, as a means of receiving

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<sup>12</sup> S. King, 'Making the Most of Opportunity: The Economy of Makeshifts in the Early Modern North', in Tomkins and King (eds.), *The Poor in England, 1700-1850*, p. 251.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Sokoll, 'Negotiating a Living: Essex Pauper Letters from London, 1800-1834', *International Review of Social History*, 24 (2000), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> TWAS, ACC.T241, All Saints Parish Poor-Relief Reports.

<sup>15</sup> TWAS, DT.BEL/5/21, Notice of Gateshead District Visiting Society, 3 January 1841.

<sup>16</sup> TWAS, DT.BEL/5/24, Gateshead District Visiting Society Annual Statement of Accounts for 1850.



aid and the task of dealing with these visitors was often left to the female of the house. This was not a role stemming out of a female sense of religiosity, rather that a stranger at the door could be more easily deterred from his task if he were collecting a debt rather than benevolently distributing gifts and the word of God.<sup>17</sup> Even here, too little material kindness and too much spiritual salvation could test the patience of recipients: John Rennison, an agent for the Darlington Christian Visiting Society, reported that one woman he called upon refused to talk to him and threw his tracts into the street. Given that this agent made at least three calls to every family in his district each year irrespective of their condition as to comfort or poverty, in addition to the visits of a Bible woman from the society, such reactions are perhaps understandable.<sup>18</sup> Even the visitors from those societies with more concrete material benefits, such as the 'Cathedral Nursing Society for the Sick Poor' which provided assistance with no religious distinction, could be met with 'violent gesticulations' from the community they worked within.<sup>19</sup>

Not all charitable bodies offered assistance delivered to the home. There were those, such as ragged schools and homes for the destitute that took in boys and girls from impoverished families. These organisations generally espoused a programme of domestic training for the girls they took in. The Northumberland Village Homes for Homeless and Destitute Girls Un-convicted of Crime was established as a preventative body designed to care for girls 'in danger from association with vice and immorality', and

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<sup>17</sup> James Jaffe has found little difference between the church attendance rates of men and women, suggesting female religiosity has been overplayed. In the parish of Whickham in the first half of the nineteenth century almost three-quarters of all families neither went to communion or conducted family prayers: 'In this sense, most families probably followed a less than rigorous religious life'; James A. Jaffe, 'Religion, Gender and Education in a Durham Parish During the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 48 (1997), p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> See Durham County Record Office (hereafter DCRO), D/X 944/1, Darlington Christian Visiting Society Committee and Annual Meeting Minute Book, 1852-1878.

<sup>19</sup> TWAS, CHX 20/2/1, Cathedral Nursing Society for the Sick Poor, Our Quarterly Record, March 1886.

put forward a programme of industrial education in 'needlework, cooking, washing, house work, and other useful occupations.'<sup>20</sup> The Newcastle Ragged and Industrial School justified such an education in an annual report:

Without enlarging on the somewhat hackneyed theme of female influence, it must be admitted that the education of girls of this rank of life has an important bearing on the moral condition of the working classes .... The wearied labourer too often finds his home a scene of dirt, disorder, and misrule, ill adapted to make him resist the temptations of the neighbouring beershop .... Could a large proportion of our young women be so educated, as to become good cooks, economical housewives, and judicious mothers, we might talk with hope and confidence of 'the good time coming'.<sup>21</sup>

In most cases the actual training, where received, was intended as a step into paid domestic service, though frequently girls in such institutions were obliged to spend much of their time in making items for sale or working in a laundry. In the case of the Newcastle Ragged School, the girls also washed for the boys, mended their clothes and served them food.<sup>22</sup> What is important to point out in relation to these institutions is perhaps less the domestic ideology that was forced, or rather reinforced, upon the girls resident at them, but that they seem to have been knowingly used by families as a stop-gap measure. In housing, feeding and clothing these children their families were relieved

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<sup>20</sup> TWAS, ACC 865/2, Rules for the Management of the Northumberland Village Homes for Homeless and Destitute Girls Un-convicted of Crime, 1881.

<sup>21</sup> TWAS, ACC 174/55, Eighth Annual Joint Report of the Newcastle Ragged and Industrial School, 1856.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Spence Watson, *Industrial Schools* (Newcastle, 1867), p. 13.

of the cost of doing so, sometimes for a number of years. The Northumberland Association for the Protection of Women and Children reported that only around two-fifths of the three hundred cases they took every year accepted domestic or other service after their time at the home. A large proportion were instead returned to friends or family, almost 30% in 1889.<sup>23</sup> This number would seem to have been highest amongst the 'lowest class of girls', who formed 'nearly one-seventh of the cases dealt with'.<sup>24</sup> Not only did such institutions relieve some of the financial burdens poor families may have suffered under but provided employment for daughters upon leaving, albeit in domestic service, that may have allowed them to contribute to the family purse.

There were, of course, many women for whom widowhood brought permanent destitution. Charitable gifts could only provide for so much. Whilst more likely to find casual labour charring or in other domestic trades, many women in the North East also refused to work and instead sought permanent relief as their right. Some complaint was made about this at the very end of our period:

It will be seen what a large proportion of the earnings are of a casual nature, and casual employment may generally be regarded as the borderline of pauperism; yet, in this connection, most of the cases enumerated were, during the period, in receipt of outdoor relief. It will be noticed also, that much of the labour is of such a character as cannot be included in any scheme of decasualisation, such as will affect the large number of women

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<sup>23</sup> This does not include those who left the home of their own accord, were thrown out, or were moved to another more suitable home.

<sup>24</sup> NRO (Morpeth Branch) 1250/43, Diocesan Society for the Protection of Women and Children Minute Book, 1885-97.

who are forced to rely on charing and domestic labour for their maintenance and that of their families. One is forced to acknowledge the self-denying sacrifices which a very large number of widows and their children exercise, in the maintenance of their independence, with a fortitude which commands one's admiration and sympathy .... It is regarded as outside the scope of poor law administration to subsidise widowhood and misfortune generally, but owing to the lack of organization of women's employment, and provision for the care of their children, a large number seek poor law relief, with its steady monetary allowance, rather than trust to the uncertainty of casual earnings or charity .... We are inclined to agree that a woman's place is at home to look after her children, which, of course, assumes there is a breadwinner. When there is no breadwinner, the position is materially altered, and unless State provision as a right is to be made for such cases, then we have the right to expect a personal effort on the part of the family to become wholly or in part the breadwinner for her family, and not to throw the onus of maintenance on the public.<sup>25</sup>

The Newcastle Aged Female Society was founded in 1835 as a result of the work amongst visitors to the Indigent and Sick Society who found that although the Society was able to provide immediate, but temporary, assistance for those families where the breadwinner was 'stricken by illness or suddenly taken away' there remained a 'large number of deserving persons, and especially aged females, who from various

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<sup>25</sup> Walker Gladstone, *Wages and Pauperism. Being a Report as to the Occupations and Earnings of Recipients of Out-Door Relief and their Dependents* (Newcastle, 1915), pp. 3-4.

circumstances were reduced to the lowest stages of poverty, struggling to keep their humble homes about them, and avoid that last resort of indigence – the workhouse.' By the 1890s this charity alone was able to provide for over two hundred women and families a year.<sup>26</sup> There were of course also numerous female friendly societies by which members who had lost husband or child could be assisted in meeting the immediate costs of funerals and debts.<sup>27</sup> Other charities, such as the Society for Clothing Distressed Females, had operated earlier in the century and sought to assist destitute women of all ages at all times: 'Though the poor of this neighbourhood were not suffering from any peculiar exigencies in the last winter, your Committee have found that in so large a town ... where there are no manufactories for the employment of females, that it requires no unusual casualties to render institutions of this kind necessary.'<sup>28</sup>

When charity failed household goods might be pawned as a short-term measure during times of desperate need. 'The Pawnshop Bleezing', printed in a collection of Tyneside songs, recalls the occasion in 1849 that Mrs Trotter's Pawnshop, situated in the Side, Newcastle, was destroyed by fire. Though written comically and rather unfairly characterises the women as pawning items in a frivolous manner, it does reflect some of the reliance upon such means and the range of goods that might be pawned. The song ends with an admonishment: 'Aye, mony a wife will rue the day, She put her husband's things away.'<sup>29</sup> It is likely though that much that was pawned constituted stolen goods.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> TWAS, CHX/5/1/1-3, Newcastle Aged Female Society, Minute Books 1873-1915.

<sup>27</sup> See for example the collection of pamphlets relating to female friendly societies at Newcastle Central Library.

<sup>28</sup> Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, Lib Room Tracts 042/4 v.291, The Fifth Report of the Society for Clothing Distressed Females Instituted in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1815 (Newcastle, 1820).

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix for the song in its entirety.

<sup>30</sup> The Online Proceedings of the Old Bailey is an invaluable source on crime in London during this period and a simple search of the text for 'pawning' produces many examples, one will suffice; Anne Kirwan appeared in 1823 charged with the theft of clothing from a house she chared at. She subsequently pawned

The official crime statistics in this period are problematic. They do not represent the actual occurrences of crime in society, rather only those acts that were registered. Patterns of definition, detection, prevention and prosecution altered not only over time but between different towns and localities.<sup>31</sup> The magistrates of Coquetdale Ward, Northumberland, complained in the 1830s that 'petty trespasses, by injury to fences for fuel, and to growing crops of corn by horses turned in at night are constantly committed ... and the offenders generally escape detection.'<sup>32</sup> There may also have been a reluctance by individuals to actively seek out the culprits. In Craike, Durham, not only was the fear of retaliation given as a cause for the failure to bring offenders to justice but the 'the natural sympathy between the culprits and officers as acquaintances and fellow townsmen.'<sup>33</sup> The victims of crime might choose alternative means of recompense other than by turning to the law. For example, in the early part of this period a woman who stole a joint of mutton from a butcher stall at North Shields market was apprehended and turned over to 'the mob' for justice.<sup>34</sup> Overall crime figures could also be swelled by certain factors. During the extensive building work that was undertaken in Newcastle during the early nineteenth century the dramatic rise in crime was attributed to the

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individual items at a number of pawnbrokers, but claimed in her defence that the smaller items were pawned in lieu of wages she was owed, whilst the more expensive items were pawned of behalf of the wife she charred for, who was unable to procure money from her husband. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 12 June 2003), 10 September 1823, Ann Kirwan (t18230910-68).

<sup>31</sup> For more on this see, Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900* (London, 1996); V.A.C. Gatrell and T.B. Hadden, 'Criminal Statistics and their Interpretation', in E.A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society. Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 336-96.

<sup>32</sup> PP, 1839, xix, *The Establishment of a Constabulary Force in the Counties of England and Wales: First Report*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> 1839, *The Establishment of a Constabulary Force*, p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 21 March 1809. This should rightly be seen as a continuation of eighteenth century attitudes towards crime and punishment.

newcomers attracted by employment in the burgeoning building trade.<sup>35</sup> In the later nineteenth century the reputation of Newcastle as a leisure town attracted men and women who resided in the surrounding area into the town centre; they were subsequently overrepresented in the crime figures of this town, especially those related to drunkenness. A similar pattern is evident in Durham City where residents in satellite villages contributed significantly to its crime rate.<sup>36</sup> Events such as horse racing and fairs could also witness an increase in crime. In 1869, the premier racing event in the region, Newcastle race week, was described, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the author was a member of the clergy, thus; 'The crime and vice, the drunkenness, fighting, prostitution, seduction, gambling, and such-like rioting, which go on in Newcastle and on the town moor during this awful week, make the whole neighbourhood a complete sink of iniquity'.<sup>37</sup> However, although such events provided the opportunity for petty crime, they were infrequent and might not coincide with periods where necessity forced individuals into acts of theft. Many crimes were those of subsistence, of fuel and of food, especially during the winter months. In Middlesbrough and south Durham, the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company brought a large number of prosecutions for the theft of coal. Though this crime was typically seen as a female offence, men were prosecuted in similar numbers.<sup>38</sup> The theft of off-cuts, waste and even bobbins and rolls of wool fibre were reported from the Darlington mills in the early nineteenth century, though only the

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<sup>35</sup> John Stephens, 'Abstract of a Return of Prisoners Coming Under the Cognizance of the Police of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, During the Ten Months from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1837 to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1838', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 1 (1838), pp. 324-26.

<sup>36</sup> See, Brian Bannison, 'Drunkenness in Turn of the Century Newcastle upon Tyne', *Local Population Studies*, 52 (1994), pp. 14-22.

<sup>37</sup> Rev J. Martin (ed.), *Incidents in the life of Robert Henderson; Or, Extracts from the Autobiography of 'Newcassel Bob,' (A Tyne-side Rake) to which is Appended a Discourse on the Prodigal Son* (Carlisle, 1869), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Policing the Victorian Town*, p. 61.

most serious incidents seem to have been prosecuted.<sup>39</sup> The demand for such items in the surrounding area – where textile work was still undertaken by women within their home – would have been high.

Crimes that occurred in urban areas caused much concern over this period. In Middlesbrough anxiety about high levels of crime were exacerbated by the over-representation of newcomers in the statistics, most especially Irish men and women. It was recorded in the Town Council minutes of 1873 that such persons were 'of the lowest class who will not work, but commit all kinds of depredations.'<sup>40</sup> Outside of the urban centres of the region much pride was taken in the apparent lack of crime. In 1823 it was claimed, no doubt with some degree of bias, that 'few places can boast a greater absence of crime than Hexham ... [despite] the want of a resident magistrate, and the small power of bailiff, [which] may be supposed prejudicial to the interests of morality.'<sup>41</sup> It is likely though that in these areas, as the quotes from Craike and Coquetdale Ward suggest, much crime was ignored or went unrecorded, and that the lack of a resident magistrate reinforced the unwillingness to report. There would seem to have been much lower incidents of crime in these predominantly agricultural areas: it is likely that this is related to the lack of goods that it would be profitable to steal. In small communities the culprits would often have been more easily detected than in urban areas, especially given that there would have been few opportunities to sell stolen goods. Stolen items in these areas were more likely to be perishable. Subsequently, given the lack of shops, it is certain that in agricultural areas much theft took the largely undetectable form of taking small crop

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<sup>39</sup> DCRO, D/Ho/C/52/144, Correspondence with John Pease.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in W.S. Martin, 'The Economic and Social Development of Middlesbrough, 1830-1880', MA thesis (University of Manchester, c. 1940); see also, Taylor, *Policing the Victorian Town*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *An Essay Towards a History of Hexham*, p. 112.



items from farms. In mining communities the picture is slightly different. The *Morning Chronicle* pointed out at mid-century the disproportion between the crime rates of the Northumberland and Durham mining areas and the average crime rate of England, which was four times higher. It was suggested that this could be attributed to the influence of Methodism and the 'isolated condition in which the mining population lives ... little exposed to the influences and excitements of great towns.'<sup>42</sup> In the case of crimes of theft, it would also have been the case that there was little to steal, apart from fuel, and that many people would have relied upon the help of their close community rather than seek to steal from neighbours. In 1887 the journal of the police constable for the area of Crawcrook, a mining community in Durham, recorded only five known thieves, all of whom were poachers, suggesting there were those willing to commit crime just beyond their immediate locality but not within it.<sup>43</sup> In respect of other crimes there may well have been a reluctance to seek justice through the police who assisted with evictions and guarded blacklegs during strikes.<sup>44</sup>

The rapid growth of Middlesbrough was accompanied by an explosion of crime. During the two decades of initial growth the population of the town was overwhelmingly male. However, women were overrepresented in crimes brought to court.<sup>45</sup> Whereas around 20% of serious crime was committed by women nationally, in Middlesbrough the

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<sup>42</sup> J. Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales 1849-1851. The letters to the Morning Chronicle from the Correspondents in the Manufacturing and Mining districts, the Towns of Liverpool and Birmingham, and the Rural Districts, vol ii: Northumberland and Durham, Staffordshire, the Midlands* (London, 1983), pp. 60-61.

<sup>43</sup> DCRO, D/X 499/34, Police Constables Journal, 26 December 1866 – 25 December 1887.

<sup>44</sup> See further, James Burke, 'Crime and Criminality in County Durham, 1840-55', MA thesis (University of Durham, 1980).

<sup>45</sup> A similar trend has been detected in the eighteenth century; see, Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, *Eighteenth-Century Criminal Transportation: The Formation of the Criminal Atlantic* (Basingstoke, 2004), Chapter Three.

figure was 28%.<sup>46</sup> These figures suggest that the lack of employment opportunities in Middlesbrough may have forced an above average number of women into criminal activities. Whilst nationally, in the late 1850s, around 25% of all offences (including serious crimes) were committed by women, in Newcastle the figure was around 32%.<sup>47</sup> In Gateshead, only a few years earlier, women represented only around 15% of persons apprehended.<sup>48</sup> Although the percentage of females committing crime are hugely different for these two areas, which were separated only by the River Tyne, the percentage of females known to have been committing crimes of theft were not. In Gateshead around a third of known thieves were female, a similar figure to that of Newcastle in 1861.<sup>49</sup> A detailed record of Newcastle gaol 1873 reveals much as to the status of female prisoners.

Table 3.1 *Marital Status of Prisoners in Newcastle Gaol, over the age of 16, 1873*

Status	Male	Female
Single	77%	39%
Married	22%	50%
Widowed	1%	11%

Source: TWAS PR/NC/6/1 'Prisoners in Newcastle Gaol, January to August 1873'.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *Policing the Victorian Town*, p. 55. By the 1870s the gendered distribution of crime in Middlesbrough was on par with national figures. David Jones found a similar overrepresentation of women in those taken to trial in his case study of the south Wales iron town, Merthyr Tydfil. See David Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Sussex, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> TWAS, MD/NC/274/2, Newcastle Watch Committee. Clive Emsley argues that taking the various crime statistics for the period 1750 to 1900 the general pattern emerges that around one in four crimes were committed by females. See Emsley, *Crime and Society in England*, p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> TWAS, DT.BEL/8/60-61, 'Return of Prisoners Apprehended', 1850, 1851.

<sup>49</sup> TWAS, MD/NC/274/2, Newcastle Watch Committee.

As can be seen from Table 3.1, whilst the overwhelming majority of male prisoners in Newcastle during 1873 were single, most female prisoners were married. The average age of these male prisoners was under twenty five years, whilst the average age of a female prisoner was over thirty. Just under 45% of male prisoners were aged twenty years or below, but only 21% of females. Whilst male crime was mostly committed by very young single men, the spread of ages amongst female criminals was wider. Table 3.2 shows the age of females in Newcastle goal in 1860. The percentage breakdowns are similar to those in 1873.

Table 3.2 *Age of Females in Newcastle Gaol, 1860*

Age	Number	Percentage of Total
Under 16	28	6%
16-21	92	20%
21-30	157	34%
30-40	139	30%
40 and above	46	10%
Total	462	100%

Source: *Proceedings of the Town Council of the Borough of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for 1860-61* (Newcastle, 1861), p. xxiii.

Although the majority of single men committed to Newcastle prison in 1873 were twenty one or under, among single women over 50% were over twenty one years of age and 30%

were over twenty five. The single older women would have been in a precarious situation given the low wages they would have received even if they could find regular employment.

There was much concern locally, and nationally, that young women might be corrupted by prison. The even age-spread of females committed to prison was seen by contemporaries to reflect a hardened class of criminals. There was a fear that a 'young female convicted of a first offence might as well be committed to any seminary of vice' as in prison she was 'forced to mingle with associates whose habits and conversations all tend to debase the mind and lead to an evil course of life.' Newcastle prison was said to be a 'nursery for crime rather than for the correction of prisoners'.<sup>50</sup> The record from 1873 would however suggest the necessity of criminal acts amongst older women, both married and unmarried, in making ends meet, as the overwhelming majority were imprisoned for the theft of small amounts of money or food. Married women may have been more likely to commit crime of theft for subsistence than their husbands because of concerns relating to the consequence of the main breadwinner being imprisoned. There were few female career criminals, although a number of repeat offenders were identified by local constables. This is not to say that theft replaced paid work, rather that it acted as a stop-gap measure in times of hardship. In 1876, L.O. Pike blamed the rise of female crime on the independent urban woman working alongside and in competition with men; 'and in proportion as they have rendered themselves independent of men for their subsistence, they have thrown off the protection against competition and temptation

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<sup>50</sup> *Proceedings of the Town Council of the Borough of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for 1856-57* (Newcastle, 1857), p. xxxiv.



which dependence on men implies.<sup>51</sup> Here though the greatest number of offenders were married and were – or had been if 'abandoned' – dependent on men and the male wage. Alongside the anxiety that was expressed over female criminals lay a concern about female drunkenness. Drunkenness featured heavily amongst crimes committed by females and contemporaries related such incidents closely to prostitution.

As has been seen, there were few employment opportunities available for working-class women in this region. Although the figures relating to prostitution are sketchy at best, one might expect for there to be an above average concentration of prostitutes in this region, given the circumstances of a lack of work available for women in urban areas and the high concentration of men. Judith Walkowitz suggests this link, that prostitution was a 'response to local conditions of the urban job market.'<sup>52</sup> Although there was much concern over the causes of prostitution, there does not seem to have been an unusually high number of women working as prostitutes. As with women who became prostitutes elsewhere, they would seem to have been born into the 'poorest sections of the community and to have acquired few skills' that would have allowed them to escape from impoverished conditions.<sup>53</sup> Women turned to prostitution because of the limited opportunities open to them, though one must be careful not to portray these women as passive victims.<sup>54</sup> Many were able to work with other women, in groups or in

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<sup>51</sup> L.O. Pike, *A History of Crime in England* (London, 1876), quoted in Emsley, *Crime and Society in England*, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth Century London. Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830* (London, 1999), p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 20. See further, Paula Bartley, *Prostitution. Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London, 2000); Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution. A Study of Victorian Prostitution in York* (Cambridge, 1979); Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes. Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1990); and, Judith Walkowitz and Jane

shared accommodation, and could to a large extent lead independent lives. There were though women for whom prostitution was not an option. Whilst the dock towns of Newcastle, Sunderland and Tynemouth experienced an almost constant stream of men – not only sailors but those from surrounding areas attracted to drinking facilities<sup>55</sup> – who were ready and willing to pay for prostitutes, women in rural areas may have had no contact with men who were willing to do so. Age, illness or disability were also factors, though contemporaries for the most part did not view prostitution as a rational choice.

For much of this period one of the main contributing factors relating to prostitution was thought to be the 'betrayed woman'. In 1868 the 'London Female Prevention and Reformatory Institution' claimed that 'fully seventy per cent of the unhappy creatures who crowd our streets have suffered their first fall through the wiles of the betrayers'.<sup>56</sup> The *Tyne Mercury* published a poem in 1802 entitled 'The Prostitute' that described in its narrative a female led into prostitution once she had been betrayed by her lover: 'Once wert thou happy – thou wert once innocent; But the seducer beguil'd thee in artlessness, Then he abandon'd thee into thine infamy.'<sup>57</sup> A few years later in *The Mental Pole-Star*, an extended plea for religiosity amongst children, the Rev J. Manners described a twenty five year old woman, 'driven ... into darkness, obscurity and misery' having been seduced and abandoned by the brother of a friend: 'I became afterwards an easy prey to others, and by degrees sunk into the lowest degree of prostitution. Since then I have been the wretched tool of tempting others, and have succeeded too often in

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Caplan, 'Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (1982), pp. 77-93.

<sup>55</sup> For example, there seems to have been a tradition among many labourers in Newcastle to spend Sundays drinking at Tynemouth. See PP, 1877, xi, *Select Committee Report on Intemperance*.

<sup>56</sup> *Middlesbrough Weekly News*, 11 December 1868, Letter from E.W. Thomas, Secretary of the London Female Prevention and Reformatory Institution.

<sup>57</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 14 September 1802.

ruining them. I am no longer fit for the society of man. I must lie here and perish.<sup>58</sup> There is some evidence that women were able to resist such categorisation of their reasons for entering prostitution. In a survey of over 3,000 imprisoned prostitutes over 40% asserted that they 'went on the streets as a matter of choice.'<sup>59</sup> Alongside the 'systematic seducer' who preyed on innocent women, drunkenness was presented not only as a cause but as a product of prostitution. The Chief Constable of Newcastle reported in 1877 that a large number of brothels sold liquor without a licence, leading to a great degree of disorderly behaviour. The Chief Constable also claimed that in the immediate neighbourhood of brothels one could witness 'large quantities of empty bottles being taken away in baskets by women who go round collecting them.'<sup>60</sup> The 1834 Select Committee on Drunkenness directly linked the popularity of gin-shops with prostitution.<sup>61</sup> Alcohol, it was thought, lowered female morals whilst stimulating animal passions.<sup>62</sup> Campaigners for temperance argued that although 'it cannot be stated that all prostitution would cease if the traffic [in drink] were prohibited; but it may safely be affirmed that the far greater portion of it would be unknown.'<sup>63</sup> Whilst many argued that women resorted to prostitution because they could command only very low wages,<sup>64</sup> there were those that argued that high wages amongst young women was a contributory factor. The Rev. James Nugent of Liverpool Gaol asserted that girls selling newspapers or other items in the street, earning money from an early age would 'by degrees ... get

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<sup>58</sup> Rev J. Manners, *The Mental Pole-Star, or, Young Men and Women's Guide to Happiness* (Newcastle, 1818), p. 152-53.

<sup>59</sup> PP, 1882, xiii, *Select Committee on the Law Relating to the Protection of Young Girls*, Appendix B.

<sup>60</sup> 1877, *Report on Intemperance*, Q. 3289-3290.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, minutes of evidence, *passim*.

<sup>62</sup> Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> T.W.P. Taylder, *Crime: Its Cause and Cure* (Newcastle, 1875), p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Milne, *Industrial Employment*, p. 239.

into the habits of drinking, and when a girl begins to drink, and gets into prison ... there is very little difference between her and a prostitute'.<sup>65</sup>

Mid-century commentators on female crime consistently document the perception of a downward progression from sexual experience to female criminality.<sup>66</sup> There were frequent printed warnings relating to prostitution and pre-marital sex, directed at both males and females. Most warned men against 'betraying' innocent women whilst describing the destruction that could arise if females succumbed to such advances. A poem, 'The Parish Poor and the Overseer' describes a betrayed young woman, whose course of life had lead to the workhouse:

Here's young and sprightly Girls too here,  
Who to vile flatt'ry lent an ear –  
Cropt like a rose in bloom!  
With anguish their past joys are fed,  
Lovers and virtue both are fled –  
The Poor-house in their doom.

You subtle gallants, O, beware!  
Not for young damsels lay your snare,  
In guile, like lawful love:  
With lust your senses you beguile;  
Remember, then, your conduct vile

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<sup>65</sup> 1882, *Protection of Young Girls*, minutes of evidence, p. 15, Q. 98-99.

<sup>66</sup> Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1991), p. 33.



Is register'd above.<sup>67</sup>

In 1880 a Newcastle poet urged men tempted to pay for prostitutes to remember that 'She's Somebody's Bairn'.<sup>68</sup> Worryingly for moralizers, attempts to raise the sexual moral standing of the working classes seemed at least partially nullified by the popularity of pornographic literature and prints such as 'Peeping Tom' and 'Paul Pry', which were not only well received in the 'lower' parts of towns but seemed to originate from a Newcastle printer.<sup>69</sup> The problem of prostitution in the towns and cities of the region continued throughout the nineteenth century and there were regular complaints in local newspapers that it was impossible for respectable women to walk after dark through public thoroughfares of the regions towns lest they be mistaken for a prostitute.<sup>70</sup>

Assessing the number of prostitutes in the North East is a difficult task. Not only was it usually a transitory activity, only undertaken for a few years or at times of hardship, but it may have been performed as a supplement to other employment, or even as a one off occasion. The sporting journalist, Arthur Binstead, describes the case of a maid at a Newcastle hotel being mistakenly paid £50, instead of the agreed £5, to spend the night with a commercial traveller. Her refusal to return the money was met with anger from the hotel manager directed not at her prostitution, but that she had overcharged a client of his hotel.<sup>71</sup> Prostitution obviously went unrecorded in normal accounts of female employment, and the figures that are collected are unlikely to

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<sup>67</sup> John Leonard, *Original Poetry, On Moral & Satirical Subjects, with Patriotic Songs, &c* (Gateshead, 1808), pp. 3-5.

<sup>68</sup> See the Appendix for this poem.

<sup>69</sup> Anon., *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor*, pp. 36, 57.

<sup>70</sup> See for example, *Tyneside Daily Echo*, 24 May 1883; *Sunderland Times and Shields, Seaham, Hartlepool and Stockton Advertiser*, 16 January 1872.

<sup>71</sup> Arthur Binstead, *A Pink 'Un and a Pelican* (London, 1898), pp. 14-21.

represent all activity. As with the crime statistics, the figures that do exist are open to misinterpretation and contain severe limitations: a leap in the number of prostitutes arrested one year could represent an effort to clamp down upon prostitution rather than an unusually high number of women choosing to engage in this activity. Additional problems arise in the classification of prostitution because towards the end of the century many prostitutes were recorded as habitual drunks.<sup>72</sup> It has been suggested that the Newcastle police force at the end of this period concentrated on arresting women for drunkenness as part of a policy aimed at curbing prostitution.<sup>73</sup> Much of what we do know in relation to numbers are estimates from individual investigators, many of whom had a reforming agenda, most often related to the temperance movement. Even those who were supposedly well informed could grossly overstate the actual figures. Dr Colquhoun, the magistrate of Thames Police, estimated that in London at the turn of the nineteenth century there were 50,000 prostitutes. The male population, disregarding children and the very elderly, capable of contributing to the 'support of the vice of prostitution' was between 150,000 and 200,000 'in the extreme'. Supposing that all of these men were licentious in their habits, the 'learned Magistrate's estimate gave one prostitute for every three or four males and alleged that every third or fourth female was a professed prostitute.'<sup>74</sup> The 1839 inquiry as to the establishment of a constabulary force suggested the more realistic figure of around 7,000 prostitutes in a population of half a million, though this is likely to have been an underestimate.<sup>75</sup> This inquiry also discussed the levels of prostitution elsewhere in the country.

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<sup>72</sup> Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody*, p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Bennison, 'Drunkenness in Newcastle', p. 18.

<sup>74</sup> 1839, *The Establishment of a Constabulary Force*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>75</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, *passim*.

Table 3.3 *Estimated Number of Prostitutes in Leading Towns, 1839*

	Metropolitan Police District	Bristol	Bath	Kingston on Hull	Newcastle upon Tyne
Well Dressed in Brothels	895 [813]	85 [85]	3 [1]	126 [95]	55 [45]
Well Dressed Walking the streets	1612 [1460]	257 [188]	130 [130]	129 [105]	43 [43]
Low Class, Infesting Low Neighbourhoods	3864 [3533]	925 [713]	260 [0]	163 [131]	353 [353]
Total	6371 [5806]	1267 [986]	393 [131]	418 [331]	451 [441]
Percentage of All Criminals	34% [34%]	36% [51%]	25% [46%]	45% [68%]	22% [25%]

Source: PP, 1839, xix, *The Establishment of a Constabulary Force in the Counties of England and Wales: First Report*, p. 9. Figures in parenthesis relate to those prostitutes and criminals 'who have no visible means of subsistence, and who are believed to live wholly by violation of the law'.

The figures in Table 3.3 may not be absolutely accurate, but as regards to Newcastle they are comparable to figures from later in the century. In 1861, 215 women were prosecuted for prostitution in Newcastle. It was estimated by the police that nationally, in 1860, there were around 30,000 prostitutes, of whom 7,119 were prosecuted for prostitution offences.<sup>76</sup> Using this ratio of prostitutes to prosecutions we can estimate that there were around 900 prostitutes in Newcastle at this time. The population of Newcastle had grown by almost 60% between 1841 and 1861. If the proportion of prostitutes to overall

<sup>76</sup> Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 2.

population remained constant we would expect from the 1839 figures for there to be around 710 prostitutes in 1861. This of course does not take into consideration that the rates of prosecution varied between districts and that with the rapid population growth experienced by Newcastle in the decade after mid-century and the general prosperity of the region, there were more men, with money to spend, to support prostitution.

The figures in Table 3.3, if taken as accurate, reveal a number of interesting points. Perhaps unsurprisingly prostitutes were overrepresented in the category of criminals that had no other means of subsistence. Almost all prostitutes in Newcastle were recorded in this category. This would suggest that either there were few opportunities to supplement income or that the income gained from prostitution alone would be sufficient. The regular convictions of prostitutes for theft from their clients would suggest this was not the case. At the dock town of Hull, female prostitutes represented 68% of all men and women who relied solely upon 'violation of the law' for their survival. In Newcastle, although there was a comparable number of prostitutes, and a greater number solely reliant upon this trade, they formed only 25% of all criminals in this class. In terms of the overall criminal population prostitution does not seem to have been such a problem for the authorities as it was in Bristol and Hull. It may also have resulted in resources at Newcastle being diverted into tackling other forms of crime. Unfortunately, the figures from the 1839 report do not include a breakdown of theft by sex, and so the percentage of women who committed acts of theft cannot be ascertained. The police returns of 1860 state that 75% of the crimes female offenders committed in Newcastle were by those who could be characterised as prostitutes, though the figures elsewhere in the region were lower: Sunderland, 60%; Durham City, 51%; Hartlepool,

48%; South Shields, 46%, and; Tynemouth, 44%.<sup>77</sup> However, the 1839 report reveals that the amount of prostitution in Newcastle does not seem to have been unusual – when, given the low availability of employment we might expect it to be higher – and was similar to Hull, a dock town of a similar size. The Judicial Statistics for 1857 to 1869, where prostitution is recorded in police returns, show that prostitution, though large in Newcastle and Sunderland was in proportion to its population, and seemingly lower than in similarly sized commercial ports. There is, however, much doubt as to how accurately prostitution was recorded by the police in some districts.

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<sup>77</sup> PP, 1861, *Judicial Statistics England and Wales, Returns for the Year 1860*, Table 2.

Table 3.4 *Prostitutes and Brothels recorded at Middlesbrough and Durham Borough*<sup>78</sup>

Prostitutes			Brothels	
Middlesbrough		Durham	Middlesbrough	Durham
1861	70 [52]	106 [36]	6	17
1862	51 [42]	123 [73]	0	15
1863	98 [16]	147 [73]	22	10
1864	51 [41]	111 [50]	0	9
1865	44 [33]	57 [41]	0	9
1866	78 [55]	131 [94]	0	11
1867	79 [64]	66 [45]	0	6
1868	71 [61]	79 [66]	0	4

Source: Middlesbrough Police Superintendent's Annual Returns of Crime, quoted in Norman Moorsom, *The Demon Drink in Mid-Victorian Middlesbrough* (Middlesbrough, 2000); DCRO DU 1/59/235-242 'Durham Borough Police Returns', 1861-68.

Table 3.4 shows the number of prostitutes and brothels recorded by the police at Middlesbrough and Durham where comparable figures are available during the 1860s. The population of Middlesbrough grew rapidly in this period, from around 20,000 in 1861 to 40,000 in 1871, during which time it gained its reputation as a frontier town. In comparison, the population of Durham City remained steady at only around 15,000. Furthermore, as outlined in Chapter One, the population of Middlesbrough at this time was dominated by young men. However, although the sex-balance of the population in Middlesbrough was skewed heavily in favour of men, there were still a greater number of

<sup>78</sup> Figures in parenthesis refer to the number of known prostitutes which were prosecuted that year.

women in Middlesbrough than Durham. It seems doubtful that Durham, where there was some female employment, housed more prostitutes than Middlesbrough where regular female employment was scant. Much seemed to have depended upon the degree to which police forces sought to seek out and register incidents of prostitution. It seems likely that in the cathedral city of Durham the police were less likely to turn a blind eye to prostitution than at Middlesbrough where crimes of assault and drunkenness were more frequent, though the claims of the Head Constable of Durham in the 1880s that there existed an 'entire absence of brothels' in the borough needs to be treated with some scepticism.<sup>79</sup> Ironically, the year in which the largest numbers of prostitutes and brothels were recorded in Middlesbrough coincided with a particularly low level of prosecution. In the late 1800s it was approximated that at least 300 women survived on prostitution alone in Middlesbrough.<sup>80</sup> Taking this estimate as correct would give a figure of around one prostitute in every hundred females, a similar figure to those for Durham in the above table, but lower than the national average calculated by Walkowitz.<sup>81</sup>

Walkowitz has argued – and most historians investigating prostitution have agreed – that the majority of prostitutes in the nineteenth century were young, single and indigenous to the area. They began such work whilst in their late teens and followed the trade no more than for a few years.<sup>82</sup> This would seem to have been the case in general, though the lack of any reliable statistics makes it difficult to conclude otherwise. The detailed record of the particulars of prisoners in Newcastle Gaol, 1873, suggests that Newcastle may not have followed the national trend at this time. It should be noted that

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<sup>79</sup> DCRO, DU/1/10/8, 'Comments by the Watch Committee on Head Constable Smith's Report on the State of Law and Order in Durham', n.d., c. 1885.

<sup>80</sup> *Northern Review*, 24 December 1887.

<sup>81</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

this is evidently a limited source and that there are no similar sources with which to compare. It may also be the case that those women recorded as prostitutes in this record, who were imprisoned for crimes such as theft, might reflect a class of prostitutes more desperately impoverished. Furthermore, it is likely that there were a number of women who worked casually as a prostitute, or had done, but were recorded as having a different or no profession. Of those women in Newcastle prison over the age of 16, around a third had their profession recorded as prostitution.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> All of the women recorded as prostitutes were over the age of 16.



Table 3.5 *Statistics Relating to Female Prisoners over the Age of Sixteen in Newcastle Gaol, 1872, with Particular Reference to those Returned as Prostitutes*

	Average Age of Prisoner				Marital Status			Location of Birth	
	Overall	Single	Married	Widowed	Single	Married	Widowed	Within Thirty Miles	Upwards of Thirty Miles
Total Prisoners	30	24	32	45	39%	50%	11%	55%	45%
Returned as Prostitutes	26	23	29	34	55%	40%	5%	65%	35%

Source: TWAS PR/NC/6/1, 'Prisoners in Newcastle Gaol', 1873.

Table 3.5, shows that prostitutes imprisoned in Newcastle at this time were only slightly younger than the average female gaol population. A greater proportion than average were likely to be single, though a significant number – 40% – were married, although a number may have been 'abandoned'. This may suggest that a far greater proportion of prostitutes resident in the provinces were married than has been previously thought. The lack of comparable data means we are unable to conclude if this figure is unusual for Newcastle, or indeed for other towns and regions. It could suggest that given the unusually low levels of paid employment on offer a number of married women may have turned to prostitution to supplement their family's income. The average age of those recorded as prostitutes reveals also a large number of women who had either become a prostitute later than was average, or having begun in their teens had continued longer than what has been thought normal. Over 50% were recorded as being of twenty five years of age or older, the oldest being thirty eight. This is comparable to the ages recorded by Walkowitz in her study of Plymouth. However, here she assigns the ageing prostitute population to the impact of the Contagious Diseases Act, which served not only to make prostitution more profitable, but deter casual prostitution.<sup>84</sup> At York, where the CDA was not in effect and there was a similar lack of employment for women, 60% of women, when first recorded as being a prostitute between 1837 and 1887, were under twenty years of age and 49% when last recorded.<sup>85</sup> Here, though, there was a surplus of women in the population and a constant demand for prostitutes from the garrison. Most prostitutes recorded in Newcastle gaol were born within thirty miles of Tyneside, but over a third were born beyond this, the majority a significant distance away, with the age

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<sup>84</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, pp. 196-210.

<sup>85</sup> Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 76.

spread of these migrants evenly balanced between those under and over twenty five years old. Frances Finnegan found around half of York's prostitutes came to the city from elsewhere.<sup>86</sup> Although there does not seem to have been unusually high rates of prostitution in the region, it does seem the case that there may have been an unusual amount of women who took up, or continued in, prostitution after marriage, and furthermore that single women attracted to the town from the countryside and elsewhere were not overrepresented in the prostitute population. That the age of prostitutes found here was concentrated in the older age range would not seem to suggest the increased profitability of prostitution as in Plymouth. If this had been the case, one would expect a greater proportion of young single women to be recorded. It suggests instead an older class of women unable to secure other forms of employment. It is likely that many of these women would have supplemented their income from prostitution by petty theft.

It hardly needs to be stated that women entering prostitution were motivated by the conditions of poverty they endured. Although it is impossible to assess the percentage of prostitutes who also committed theft, either in the form of taking money from their clients or otherwise, as in other areas cases were frequently brought against prostitutes for theft. The diary of Thomas Davison, a magistrates clerk, records some such incidents. In February 1846 a number of women were brought to trial for the theft of money from men. All of these incidents occurred at houses in Sandgate, a street on the quayside of Newcastle that had become a byword for an entire area, stretching from the streets below the castle, to the slums and chares strung east along the river. Sandgate was thought to have 'social characteristics of its own' and it was claimed that 'respectable

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

people, having no occasion to visit it, scarcely know anything about it.<sup>87</sup> The engineering journal *The Builder* claimed that 'Cologne has a bad name, Cairo has a worse reputation, but that part of Newcastle called Sandgate, must be allowed to exceed either City in stench, filth, over-crowding, and pestilential ills.'<sup>88</sup> It was reported that police commonly referred to Sandgate as the City of Sin.<sup>89</sup> Only one of the incidents of theft recorded by Davison in this month involved a woman acting alone. Here, Jane Green, 18, was charged with robbing 'one George Scott, a labourer, of four sovereigns, while sitting with him on a bed-side in a room in Sandgate on Saturday night.' Another incident involved two young women robbing a man of over seventeen shillings in a house in Sandgate. One trial concerned the robbery of £50 from a John Smith whilst he was in a house in Sandgate. Four women and two men were brought to trial in what was, presumably, an organised ambush on the man. They were apprehended at a nearby pub the same evening with 'most of the money.'<sup>90</sup> The local press also reported similar incidents. These press reports were regular, but not numerous, and usually involved an unusual element or a detail of particular interest. The *Northern Liberator* discussed in length the case of a man thrown to his death from a 'house of ill-fame' by two men, after having been robbed of money by a prostitute who had claimed she would use it to bring beer back to the bedroom.<sup>91</sup> A more typical case involved only theft, such as that reported by the *Tyne Mercury* in 1806:

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<sup>87</sup> Anon., *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor*, p. 22.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Thomas Bryson and Thomas Dawson, *Remarks by the Town Surveyor and Inspector of Nuisances, on an Article in the 'Builder' Headed 'Condition of our Chief Towns – Newcastle upon Tyne'* (Newcastle, 1861), p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Anon., *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor*, p. 12.

<sup>90</sup> TWAS, DX/55/1/3, Diary of Thomas Davidson, Clerk to Newcastle Magistrates, February 1846.

<sup>91</sup> *Northern Liberator*, 12, 18 October 1839.

Last week, at North Shields, a London traveller, who had been late out on business, unluckily enquired his way to an inn of two women of the town, who conducted him to the infamous receptacle of the *Hole in the Wall*, nor did he perceive his mistake till he left it next morning, when he missed his pocket-book, which contained 80*l.* in bank notes. He directly returned, but everyone denied having any knowledge of it; till a bully of the stews, on the traveller's going to depart, asked him, by way of derision, what he would give for the book. The fellow was immediately secured, which had the desired effect; for the females, being struck with fear, lest the man should betray them, returned the book, though not exactly as they got it. His loss, however, was less than could have been expected, considering the hands it was in.<sup>92</sup>

As Walkowitz has argued, one of the distinguishing features of prostitution in England was the strong female subculture, of prostitutes who worked independently of pimps. As the above quote shows, this was not always the case. Although many prostitutes operated from lodging houses, frequently owned by older women, many relied upon finding custom in male owned pubs and 'swankey shops'. Some would have used rooms on the premises, others took their inebriated clients to nearby houses: 'after closing time .... it was pitiable beyond expression to see the desperation of those girls who failed to attract even the most profligate to their abodes. I saw one going about, taking hold first of one and then of another. I saw another sitting in the gutter.'<sup>93</sup> An investigator of

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<sup>92</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 7 October 1806.

<sup>93</sup> Anon., *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor*, pp. 11-12.

prostitution in 1883 claimed that 'bullies' thrived in this 'blighted and rotten district'.<sup>94</sup> However, a number of local papers showed an unusual degree of interest in the issue of prostitution in the first half of this year, no doubt inspired by the debate surrounding the Contagious Diseases Act.<sup>95</sup> These reports indicate that most of the rooms used by prostitutes were managed by women, though one man was brought to trial on six separate charges of running a brothel. Some of the buildings were owned by men and rented out to women who managed the brothel, though a female owner was no guarantee of fair treatment: one case described the rent charged on a property being run as a brothel as more than five times the standard rate.<sup>96</sup>

There certainly seems to have been a degree of tolerance amongst the neighbours of women working as prostitutes. Prostitutes were not segregated within their community. Witnesses to incidents such as the death of the man thrown from a brothel window were certainly aware of who worked at them. Hostility only seems to have occurred when pressure was brought to bear by the authorities. However, constables were instructed to avoid confrontations with individual prostitutes: 'a Constable is always to act with firmness, yet he is never to interfere needlessly. With common prostitutes, not riotous or behaving indecently or disorderly, the Constable is not to hold any communication whatever, but he must not allow them to assemble in crowds on his beat, or to interrupt persons passing'.<sup>97</sup> They were however obliged to report any person keeping a room that was occupied by a prostitute within a building used for the sale of

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<sup>94</sup> Anon., *The Devil's Mud Bath: Or, the Unholy Slave Traffic in Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Newcastle, 1883), p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> This act was not enforced in the North East, as the ports here were of a commercial nature and were only infrequently used by the navy.

<sup>96</sup> *Tyneside Daily Echo*, 9 March 1883. For reports of conviction see *Tyneside Daily Echo*, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* and *Northern Daily Express*, January to May 1883.

<sup>97</sup> TWAS, ACC 604/856, 'Borough of Newcastle upon Tyne. The Borough Police Constable's Guide, by the Watch Committee', 1869.

food or refreshment, though typically few seem to have done so.<sup>98</sup> There was perhaps a recognition that for many women prostitution was a temporary measure, meaning they would experience 'little difficulty in reintegrating into a part of society which the great majority of them never really left.'<sup>99</sup> One needs to be careful not to overstate the degree of camaraderie between prostitutes and their neighbours. Even if many people tolerated their work and treated them no differently after they had stopped working as a prostitute, they were likely to experience a great deal of abuse. The toleration of neighbours may have extended only so long as the prostitutes did not entice their husbands to part with hard earned money. Even potential clients who were known to prostitutes would offer abuse: '[Sarah] Stoker came across the street and asked if we were going to give her a drink of beer to-night. The answer I gave ... "You may go to hell, you ugly-looking bitch, for I will give you no beer."' <sup>100</sup> The survival strategies of single, married and widowed women did not involve easy choices.

Given the low rates of female employment it is important to understand the strategies of survival that were adopted by impoverished women. Applications for poor relief and to charitable bodies could often be the most cost effective route to be taken but they were not an easy option. It may have necessitated familiarising themselves with religious texts they had no interest in or losing a son or daughter to temporary institutional care. That almost all of the married women in this region did not engage in formal paid employment does not mean that they had no agency or control over their lives, but, to paraphrase the quote from Ogle which opened Chapter Two, were stimulated to various forms of labour where necessary to maintain their family in the

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<sup>98</sup> TWAS, ACC 604/703, 'Byelaws for the Borough of Newcastle', 1837, reprinted 1868.

<sup>99</sup> Henderson, *Disorderly Women*, p. 51.

<sup>100</sup> *Northern Liberator*, 12 October 1839.

degree of comfort which they came to regard as necessary. Whilst men dealt in money, wives dealt in survival and their work was respected and recognised as vital.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# THE PAID EMPLOYMENT OF FEMALES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND THE TOWN

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Two o'clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St Saviour's. And yet more than a dozen girls still sat in the room into which Ruth entered, stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape, or show any outward manifestation of sleepiness. They only sighed a little when Ruth told Mrs Mason the hour of the night ... for they knew that, stay up late as they might, the work-hours of the next day must begin at eight, and their young limbs were very weary.

Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the previous chapters have discussed the low levels of female employment in the region it is clear that there were women who worked for money and that this was essential to their survival. Moreover, despite the low rates of employment many women would have been employed at some point during their life. Many females, as elsewhere in the country, worked like Gaskell's Ruth as dressmakers or milliners; many others were engaged in domestic employments. This work was laborious, with long hours and inadequate remuneration. This chapter will discuss some of the employments taken up by women in the rural and urban areas of the North East. This is not an exhaustive account, nor is it intended to be, rather it picks up the most interesting and important threads of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853; Oxford, 1998), p. 3. Gaskell referred to *Ruth* as her 'Newcastle novel', and a number of characters seem to have been based upon friends in that town.

female employment in this region. As such a number of overlapping narratives develop. Female labour was most valued where it was performed in tandem with other family members, in traditional enterprises that frequently served as a figurative opposite to the urban and the industrial, such as farming and fishing. In other areas, female employments were pushed out, though not always intentionally and often with what was perceived to be the best interests of the women workers in mind. For many women it seems that hard paid employment, coupled as it was with the burden of domestic duties, was not in their best interests.

### *Rural Employment*

The work available within rural communities was not solely agricultural, despite the frequency with which 'rural' is used to signify farming by nineteenth-century commentators and historians alike. Rural communities, typified by the southern farming village, have often served as an 'imagined community' for England, a 'constantly moving signifier', acting as a 'refuge from the pressures of modernity'.<sup>2</sup> A concentration on the south of England has served to exclude northern counties from this 'selective sense' of identity. The following section examines the non-urban North East, looking in particular at the nature of female employment within the farming, coal mining and fishing industries. It is not always easy to distinguish clearly between the urban and rural within this region. Whilst the smaller villages within, for example, the union of Glendale can by all accepted definitions be termed rural, the mining communities of Durham are less easily defined. It could be argued that even the larger urban areas of Newcastle,

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Reay, *Rural Englands. Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 9.

Sunderland, Darlington and Middlesbrough present a problem. Though these populous and industrial towns fulfil all the criteria of what may be termed urban, the growth these areas experienced, especially at Newcastle, was centred upon rivers. Urban growth stretched along these banks, meaning most residents remained within a short walking distance of the countryside. However, the 'rural' has remained almost synonymous with farming, and the following discussion of female employment in rural areas begins with female farm workers.

There have recently been a number of studies examining the conditions and wages of female farm workers, as well as those offering calculations of the numbers that may have been employed. With the notable exception of Gielgud's doctoral thesis on Northumberland and Cumberland, the tendency has been to focus upon southern counties with little reference to evidence from the North East.<sup>3</sup> Current scholarship has argued that the agricultural revolution took place in the decades after 1750.<sup>4</sup> There has been some discussion as to whether there was a 'rigid division between men and women's work across rural England',<sup>5</sup> though this debate has centred solely upon farm workers. As will be seen, the conditions and practices of female farm workers in the north east, particularly in Northumberland, was often distinct from elsewhere in England.

Although agriculture in Northumberland was considered to have lagged behind other counties in productivity and farming methods through the seventeenth century, progress was made during the eighteenth century. By 1800, Northumberland and

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<sup>3</sup> Judy Gielgud, 'Nineteenth Century Farm Women in Northumberland and Cumbria: The Neglected Workforce', Ph.D. thesis (University of Sussex, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of this debate see Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Durham were recognized as important centres of agriculture,<sup>6</sup> and by the mid-nineteenth century Northumberland was being held-up as a model of high farming.<sup>7</sup> In the eighteenth century agriculture was the most important economic activity in the region, and was only overtaken by coal in the numbers employed in 1851. It did, though, remain an important source of employment throughout the nineteenth century. It was in this period that on the national stage female agricultural labourers came under increasing scrutiny, and were begun to be seen as a problem. The criticism aimed at female agricultural workers is exemplified by the outcry caused on the publication in 1867 of the report of *Commissioners on Children, Young Persons and Women*. This led to a Royal Commission investigation into the work of females and children engaged in agricultural work. This concern was mostly related to agricultural gangs, a feature of farming around Norfolk and other southern counties.<sup>8</sup> Female field workers were castigated as 'unsexed, "demoralised" demons',<sup>9</sup> the mixing of sexes within the farmhouse being a major cause of moral decay.<sup>10</sup> Snell argues that though the force of this moralizing may have reinforced the sexual division of labour within agriculture, the pattern of female work was already in place by the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Within the North East, not only was the pattern of female work different but the criticism of their employment substantially muted.

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<sup>6</sup> McCord, *North East England*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> G.E. Fussell, 'High Farming in the North of England, 1840-1880', *Economic Geography*, 24 (1948), pp. 226-310.

<sup>8</sup> Nicola Verdon, 'The employment of women and children in agriculture: A Reassessment of Agricultural Gangs in Nineteenth-Century Norfolk', *Agricultural History Review*, 49 (2001), pp. 41-55.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Sayer, 'Field-Faring Women: The Resistance of Women who worked in the Fields of Nineteenth Century England', *Women's History Review*, 2 (1993), p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 91; See also, Mark Freeman, *Social Investigation and Rural England* (Suffolk, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> K.D.M. Snell, 'Agricultural Seasonal Unemployment, the Standard of Living and Women's Work in the South and East, 1690-1860', *Economic History Review*, 34 (1981), pp. 407-37.

Snell recognizes that the sexual division of labour in the northern counties was less rigid than that in the South East.<sup>12</sup> Agricultural employment in the region was unusual in that it adhered to a system of bondage. This was a form of hiring that existed only in Northumberland and the Scottish borders. The diary of a farm tenant at Lilburn Grange, near Alnwick, records a typical agreement. The hind, or male farm worker, was engaged on a yearly basis, at a local hiring fair. As a part of the agreement the hind was 'obliged to find a woman to work for them in the fields, for women work in the fields the whole year.'<sup>13</sup> Whilst the male workers agreed a yearly wage, these women workers, or bondagers, were only paid for the days on which she worked. She lived in the cottage supplied to the hind by the farmer, and the hind was responsible for supplying her with food. If the hind did not have a female relative who could perform this work he was obliged to take on someone who was often a stranger: 'his family commonly have employment ... but one female labourer he is bound to have always in readiness, to answer the master's call, and to work at stipulated wages.'<sup>14</sup> This was the most common form of female employment upon farm land in Northumberland, though in the south of the region and in Durham day labourers were more prominent. The system of bondage was deemed to work well if the hind had an elder daughter or wife able to work, though relations could be strained if it was necessary to hire a stranger, whom they were obliged to provide for as well as for their family.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> NRO, 851, 'A Diary of Farming at Lilburn Grange Farm, by M. Howey', July 1842.

<sup>14</sup> Report of F.H. Doyle on Northumberland, PP, 1843, xii, *Reports of the Special Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p. 296.

<sup>15</sup> NRO, 851, 'Diary', discusses this issue.

There was some attempt by hinds to remove the requirement to provide a bondager, most notably in 1837 and again in 1873.<sup>16</sup> A small increase in wages resulted. Although Jane Long claims that the system of bondage had been curtailed by the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>17</sup> many farmers continued to require a bondager, sometimes with the term substituted with a phrase such as 'woman worker'.<sup>18</sup> There was though a movement towards a purely familial system of hiring, witnessed also in the border regions of Scotland, leading one commentator to mistakenly claim the system of bondage no longer existed.<sup>19</sup>

A number of agricultural tasks were performed predominantly by men, such as ploughing, in which boys often received an unofficial apprenticeship, thus helping to propagate the sexual division of labour. There are though a number of tasks that can be identified as being universally performed by women across England.<sup>20</sup> These include cleaning the land (i.e. hoeing and stone-picking), haymaking, planting, and harvesting root crops. Snell finds the evidence from the 1843 *Report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture* striking in that it represents a more limited role for the majority of female agricultural workers than in the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> However, in Northumberland, women workers continued to perform many of the tasks that women

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<sup>16</sup> Gielgud, 'Nineteenth Century Farm Women', pp. 325-32.

<sup>17</sup> Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms*, p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Gielgud, 'Nineteenth Century Farm Women', p. 326, n. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Neville, *A Corner in the North*, p. 12. See also Barbara W. Robertson, 'In Bondage: The Female Farm Worker in South-East Scotland', in Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach (eds.), *The World is Ill Divided. Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> These can be ascertained from the 1843 *Reports on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, and are summarised in Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, pp. 64-65. See also Karen Sayer, '"Field-faring Women": The Resistance of Women Who Worked in the Fields of Nineteenth Century England', *Women's History Review*, 2 (1993), pp.185-98; Nicola Verdon, 'A Diminishing Force? Reassessing the Employment of Female Day Labourers in English Agriculture, c. 1790-1850', in Lane, Raven and Snell, *Women, Work and Wages*, pp. 190-211; and, Michael Roberts, 'Sickles and Scythes: Women's Work and Men's Work at Harvest Time', *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (1979), pp. 3-29.

<sup>21</sup> Snell, 'Agricultural Seasonal Unemployment', p. 427.

would have performed in previous centuries. This included nominally male tasks such as ploughing, threshing and dung spreading: 'It is considered specially the work of women to clean out the cattle byres, which no doubt they do keep in splendid order. It is their part also to turn over the vast heaps of manure that are stacked in the field in the winter ... It is difficult to see why these unpleasant and less healthy employments should be thought more suited for women than for men.'<sup>22</sup> Arthur Munby described the kind of work Northumberland bondagers performed:

If there is nothing to do in the fields, she often helps to do the dirty work of her master's house or her master's master's; ... I saw the bondager busy at the washtub: but she is not bound to such trivial tasks: she may lounge about like a lad & whistle or snooze, until she be ordered afield. Once afield she is put to any thing, except ploughing and ditching. She takes up potatoes: she hoes turnips: she cleans the land of weeds and stones: she harrows at times: she leads the team and drives the cart: she spreads muck in the furrows and stands on the midden and loads the dung cart: she cleans out the byre and the pig sty, aided sometimes by a boy: she makes hay of course: she binds the corn, and she reaps with the sickle, three women reaping down an acre per diem. But reaping machines are coming in fast; and then she tents the machine.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Neville, *A Corner in the North*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Munby Diaries, August 1863, quoted in Horn, *Labouring Life*, pp. 256-57.

Although Neville, rector of Ford, found it 'very painful' to see women working at such tasks, he did not blame the employers and attributed the situation to convention. He thought any change would be impossible as 'the men on a farm would probably refuse to do the work that it has so long been customary for women to do.'<sup>24</sup>

Not only did women play a large role in the success of agriculture in the region, but they took pride in their work. Though farmers did not provide female workers with any clothing, they seem to have dressed in uniform. Their dress was said to consist of a 'dark petticoat with coloured stripes, usually of yellow; over this is worn a cotton dress looped up and over that a gay pinafore often of a light pink colour, and to surmount all a little knitted shawl over the shoulders.'<sup>25</sup> Long has argued that an increasing acceptance by women of the codes of femininity led to a decline in their acceptance of bondage work.<sup>26</sup> Her argument tends to assume that there was some local pressure on these women to give up farm work which seems not to have been the case. The closest commentators in the region came to condemning female agricultural work was those remarks by Donkin in 1869: 'It might be difficult to justify the propriety of employing women upon masculine labour .... yet as being conducive to health, those exercises will bear a favourable comparison with the toils of the seamstresses in her garret, or the employment of the factory girl.'<sup>27</sup> The report from Northumberland and Durham on the

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<sup>24</sup> Neville, *A Corner in the North*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Anne M. Scott, 'Women's Working Dress on the Farms of the East Borders', *Costume*, 10 (1977) p. 41. See also NRO, Library, Liz Taylor, 'To Be A Farmer's Girl. Bondagers of the Border Counties', *Country Life*, 12 October 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms*, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Donkin, *Agricultural Labourers of Northumberland: Their Physical and Social Condition* (Newcastle, 1869), pp. 12-13. In December 1906, Lisbeth Simm, of the Women's Labour League, wrote in her column in the *Northern Democrat*, wrote of 'unwomanly' field work and the hope that 'even amongst the isolated women servants on scattered farms the light is breaking'. This was an isolated plea, remarkable only in that it came over thirty years after similar comments – from a different perspective – in national



*Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women*, 1867-8, discussed the contention that the work these women performed was unsuitable for females:

There are many who hold the opinion that field work is degrading, but I should be glad if they would visit these women in their own homes after they become wives and mothers. They would be received with a natural courtesy and good manners which would astonish them. Let the visitor ask to see the house; he will be "taken over" it, with many apologies that he should have seen it not "redd up" .... When he inquires about the children he will hear that though they have not much to give them, the parents felt it to be their sacred duty to secure them the best instruction in their power and "that they are determined they shall have." The visitor will leave that cottage with the conviction that field work has no degrading effect, but that he has been in the presence of a thoughtful, contented, and unselfish woman.<sup>28</sup>

A Reverend at Wooler echoed these comments in 1892, and endorsed female field workers as forming a 'healthy stock of future mothers.'<sup>29</sup> The decline in the number of female bondagers is more easily explained by other factors. The increasingly efficient networks of transport allowed greater movement within south Northumberland: that is, young females were not responding to a change in patterns of female behaviour, but were attracted to urban areas that they were more practically connected to than the generation

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publications; see *The Labourer's Union Chronicle and Journal of the National Agricultural Labourers Organisation*, 16, 23 August 1873.

<sup>28</sup> PP, 1867-8, xvii, *Report of Commissioners on Children's, Young Person's, and Women's Employment in Agriculture*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Report on Glendale, PP, 1893-4, xxxv, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 136.

of their parents.<sup>30</sup> Fox, in discussing the poor law union of Glendale, commented on the 'desire for a more sociable life in the towns and the greater freedom which the employment there generally affords.'<sup>31</sup> That Cleghorn, an estate clerk, thought that 'a porter on the railway would consider himself superior to a hind, and that a hind's daughter would think she was bettering her position by marrying anyone not connected with agricultural employment',<sup>32</sup> should not be seen, as it has by Long, as a rejection of the unfeminine farm.<sup>33</sup> Rather, Cleghorn was expressing the desire many young women and men would have felt to experience life beyond the small and isolated village settlement. Furthermore the general decline in agriculture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century led to a decline in the number of workers needed. Particularly for those living in south Northumberland it became increasingly attractive to seek permanent work outside farming communities. This was a pattern also followed by young males and females. The system of yearly hiring served to exclude many seeking casual work as farmer, unable to 'economise in his labour bill ... by having a smaller regular staff and employing extra labour in busy times ... has to pay all year round, in sickness as in health, and in bad weather as in good, a staff sufficient to undertake the work at all seasons of the year'.<sup>34</sup> In 1892 it was reported that the population of Glendale was now lower than it had been at the start of the century, despite recent wage increases.<sup>35</sup> Employers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century were squeezed by demands for higher wages from hinds and the economic impact of agricultural depression.

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<sup>30</sup> For example areas of north Northumberland were not connected by railway until the 1880s.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Wilson Fox on poor law union of Glendale, 1893-4, *Royal Commission*.

<sup>32</sup> 1893-4, *Royal Commission*, Glendale, p. 103.

<sup>33</sup> Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms*, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> PP, 1894, xvi, *Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression*, Glendale district, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> The Agricultural Labourer of Glendale, Being a Draft Report in Form of a Letter to A.W. Fox, 5 December 1892, in NRO, ZCU 42, Reports by George Culley of Fowberry to the Local Government Board, 1877-1892.

Increasingly farms were laying land to grass and employing less labour. It was reported in the early twentieth century that in Northumberland 'several farms in this neighbourhood which used to keep seven or eight pairs of horses working now have none, and instead of upwards of twenty hands now employ only a couple of men.'<sup>36</sup> Although in most cases wages had increased by around 20% since 1890 farm labourers were 'attracted to urban districts by the prospect of higher wages and other advantages.' In Durham, male workers continued to be attracted 'to the towns, iron works, and coal mines, thinking to improve their conditions of life.'<sup>37</sup> In Hartlepool, those employed at the large iron works towards the end of this period were nearly all 'country-bred men'.<sup>38</sup>

However, the fall in the number of workers employed in agriculture came late to the North East and the numbers employed were still substantial at the beginning of the twentieth century – around 16,500 men and women. The post-Napoleonic War period, in which demobbed soldiers flooded the employment market, followed by agricultural depression, has been seen as one in which female employment suffered a decline.<sup>39</sup> This has been said to have been followed by a period of prosperity after 1834, when 'a combination of factors – the abolition of outdoor relief, the inadequacy of the male wage and the economising of farmers – led once more to a rise in women's agricultural labour.'<sup>40</sup> This pattern does not seem to have been followed in Northumberland. The impact of returning soldiers seems to have been less pronounced in the agricultural areas of the North East than in southern England, or indeed the urban centres of the region, where the sudden drop in demand for armaments threw many out of work. As Horn has

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<sup>36</sup> PP, 1906, xcvi, *Report on the Decline in the Agricultural Population of Great Britain, 1881-1906*, p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> PP, 1904, xxxii, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, vol. ii, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*.

<sup>40</sup> Verdon, *Rural Women Workers*, p. 23.

pointed out there was a large decrease in the number of female outdoor agricultural labourers and farm servants after mid-century. In 1851 just short of 145,000 females were employed in England and Wales as such, falling to below 60,000 by 1871.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to directly compare these figures to those from the North East where bondagers would frequently have been classified by the census as a farmer's wife or daughter rather than an agricultural labourer in her own right. The demand for bondagers seems to have risen over the nineteenth century,<sup>42</sup> and during the 1860s a common complaint was that it had become difficult to find as many females to work as bondagers as was needed.<sup>43</sup> The high demand only began to fall after 1881 in tandem with a decline in the number of male workers and with the onset of general agricultural depression.<sup>44</sup> Whilst in southern counties it was reported that 'women were found to be less and less disposed to go out to work upon the land; "that they refused unsuitable work, and would stay at home on wet days"', women in Northumberland continued to take up field work.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century over a quarter of Northumberland agricultural labourers were female. In Durham, where the system of bondage was not used, only 10% of agricultural labourers were recorded as female.<sup>46</sup> The proportion of female agricultural labourers in Northumberland remained fairly steady, though declining, in the final forty years of this study. In 1881 females made up just over 28% of all agricultural labourers in

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<sup>41</sup> Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin, 1975), p. 148.

<sup>42</sup> Eve Hostettler, 'Women Farm Workers in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Northumberland', *North East Labour History* 16 (1982), pp. 40-42.

<sup>43</sup> The Munby Diaries, August 1863, quoted in Horn, *Labouring Life*, p. 257.

<sup>44</sup> This was said to have impacted upon farmers in this region from 1879; 1894, *Royal Commission on Agriculture*, Glendale, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Mr Fraser, reporting on Norfolk, Essex, Sussex and Gloucester and Suffolk; 1867-8, *Report of Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. x.

<sup>46</sup> Census, 1891, p. 466. Similar figures can be found in the 1901 census.

Northumberland, falling to just under 25% by 1911, during which the total number of males and females employed fell by 30%.

Whilst in other regions the late nineteenth-century agricultural depression reinforced the dominance of male labourers and the number of female workers fell away, the percentage of female workers in Northumberland and Durham remained high and steady. This does not necessarily mean that agricultural employment for women was abundant. Honeyman has pointed out that those counties, such as Northumberland, with the highest levels of female unemployment were those that were predominantly agricultural.<sup>47</sup> In the case of North Northumberland this statement is misleading. Although overall female employment in all occupations was low, this was not due to an unwillingness to provide employment opportunities within agriculture, as shown by the high percentage of female workers, but a result of a predominantly agricultural economy that had few alternative industries. However, it is important to recognize that the bondager system in the region made females reliant upon men for much of their employment. A reduction in the number of men in agriculture would not necessarily allow women to fill the gap that would be left, even if the cause was for reasons other than a contraction in trade, as these workers were supplemental to male labour: a male hind who removed himself to an urban area would not be replaced by a female. It was remarked in 1867 that 'to prohibit female labour [in this region] ... would simply be to prohibit farming.'<sup>48</sup> Whilst farmers relied upon the cheap labour females provided, truly 'independent waged labourers'<sup>49</sup> were in the minority in the region; most females were tied to this work by family or marriage. The decline in the number of hinds taking on a

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<sup>47</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation*, p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> 1867-8, *Report of the Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> Sayer, "'Field-Faring Women'", p. 186.

stranger as a bondager meant that although 'women make their own arrangements with the hinds ... as they are nearly always their daughters, probably no arrangement is made at all, and the wages go into the common family fund'.<sup>50</sup> There were some opportunities for female casual day labourers, but in Northumberland these tended to be family members of a hind.

As with other occupations, the census tends to underestimate female labour. Discovering the true numbers employed is made difficult by the fact that few wage books have survived from small farms; the small amount of evidence that survives from the larger farms is unlikely to be representative as owners here could afford machinery. Although these sources can be problematic, they do allow an approximation of the true numbers working in agriculture and the importance of day labourers. Evidence from the wage books of the Swinburne estate, near Capheaton in Northumberland, hint at the level of under-recording in the census, but also serves as a reminder that much farm work was of a casual nature. The farm on the Swinburne estate employed between five and twenty persons in any one week depending on the time of year, in 1871 and 1881.<sup>51</sup> Of this, around five men were regularly employed all year round. Female labour was less regular, peaking in July and August before dropping off and reaching a downturn around December. In 1871 fourteen females worked at some stage on the farm and in 1881 there were thirteen. The 1871 census for Capheaton shows that of these women only two were returned as agricultural labourers and only three had worked over fifty days. Of the others, four were not recorded in the census, one was recorded as a domestic servant, one as a grocers' assistant, the remainder mostly being returned as scholars. This issue of the

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<sup>50</sup> 1893-4, *Royal commission on Labour*, Glendale, p. 104.

<sup>51</sup> NRO, 322/2/3, Swinburne Estate Labourer's Time Book, June 1870 - July 1871; NRO, 322/3, Swinburne Estate Labourer's Time Book, March 1881 - June 1882. The following figures are from these sources.

employment of children presents a difficulty where the labourer books of a farm cannot be compared accurately to a census, as few wage books recorded the age of workers. Of those who were not recorded as agricultural labourers in the census but worked some time on the farm, three had worked less than twelve days. Mary Dobson, recorded as working as a grocer's assistant, was employed casually in agricultural tasks for 22 days worth of work between 1870 and 1871. In 1881, of the ten women entered in the census who worked at the Swinburne estate four are recorded as agricultural labourers. One of the women recorded as an agricultural labourer worked less than forty five days, whilst Jane Green, Mary Beattie and Mary Ann Elliot who were entered as unoccupied worked a combined total of over 365 days. What farm wage books often show though is that female employment for the most part was infrequent and unreliable. It would have been almost impossible for an independent woman who was not a bondager to secure a living from this work. The short spells during the year in which more hands were needed seemed to have often resulted in the women with some regular farm employment being overworked, though they may have been assisted by a small number of workers under sixteen years of age.<sup>52</sup> As mentioned above, the system of hiring meant that the wage budget on most farms was settled at the start of the year and was not flexible enough to respond to any unforeseen short-term need to employ extra labourers. The census also shows that at Swinburne the majority of casual workers were related to a hind. This is obviously a limited source; however, it does show that although there was much agricultural labour performed by women that went unrecorded by the census, this work could be one of perhaps a number of employments undertaken by female worker and the

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<sup>52</sup> 1867-8, *Report of the Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. 234; NRO, 322/3, Swinburne Estate Time Book.

number of days worked insufficient to be considered their main employment. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the levels recorded in the census remained high, and higher even than in some counties where efforts have been made by historians to account for those that the census did not officially report.

The 1851 census records that in England and Wales around 5% of all outdoor agricultural labourers were female. Joyce Burnette has calculated that the figure given of 43,000 females is an underestimate and accounts for only 41% of the female workforce at the time.<sup>53</sup> The amended figure of 104,000 accounts for just over 10% of the total employed. In Northumberland, the census recorded that females accounted for over 22% of outdoor agricultural labourers. This is certainly a large underestimate as many bondagers would not be recorded in this category. If Burnette's calculation is applied to Northumberland, females would have accounted for over 40% of the workforce at this time. The figure for County Durham would rise from 14% to almost 30%, well above Burnette's amended average. Burnette's calculation is centred upon accounting for unrecorded day labourers and so is more applicable to Durham than Northumberland. Issues of applicability aside, it is worth noting that even the un-amended figures for this region, in both counties, reveal a greater percentage of female farm labourers than the recalculated national figure.

The number of females working in agriculture in Northumberland, and to a lesser extent in Durham, was high in both the numbers employed and as a proportion of the workforce. Female labour was valued, relatively well paid and pride was taken over this work, but it was also uncertain and familial: 'Even after they have reached the age of

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<sup>53</sup> Joyce Burnette, 'The Wages and Employment of Female Day-Labourers in English Agriculture, 1740-1850', *Economic History Review*, 57 (2004), p. 682.



maturity the whole family "make common cause with a common purse."<sup>54</sup> Unlike the areas studied by Burnette, where higher female wages in agriculture were a response to the demand for female labour in other industries, this was not the case in Northumberland, where there were few opportunities for employment throughout most of the region.<sup>55</sup> It was only in the south of Northumberland, where single women frequently went out to service, responding to the 'great demand which exists in the towns for country servants',<sup>56</sup> that a degree of choice was available. This seems to have resulted in the wives of farm labourers having to take up extra agricultural work to make up the shortfall in family income resultant from a daughter taking up work outside the local area.<sup>57</sup> This highlights that even the relatively small monetary contributions that the casual agricultural work performed by women made to the family income could be essential to survival. In County Durham the majority of women employed in agricultural work were married.<sup>58</sup> Farm owners in Durham had been unable to compete with the wages offered from, initially, coal mining, and later iron ore mining. The exodus of men from agricultural employment is reflected in the relatively high percentage of females among agricultural workers in the census. High agricultural wages in Durham seem to have reflected a lack of female labour, despite the lack of alternative opportunities. There seems to have been some resistance among single females in Durham in taking up this employment. Much of this has to do with the influence of the mining communities that frequently overlapped with the interests of agriculture.

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<sup>54</sup> 1867-8, *Report of the Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. xii-xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Burnette, 'The Wages and Employment of Female Day-Labourers', p. 667.

<sup>56</sup> 1867-8, *Report of the Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. 58

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

In County Durham, agriculture had declined sharply in economic importance over this period. In the early twentieth century it was said that southern Northumberland and Durham formed counties of 'violent contrasts' for the speed in which the traveller exchanges 'purely pastoral or agricultural country for densely populated colliery areas of that still more dreary land where the coal has been won and farming is being resumed in a half-hearted way.'<sup>59</sup> Even in the first half of the nineteenth century it was claimed that in County Durham agriculture was a 'sort of novelty'.<sup>60</sup> Instead of fields of wheat and barley the county was instead 'dotted with those buildings and scaffold apparatus which denote that beneath each of them a mine shaft sinks into the earth, but totally unmarked by that luxuriant crop of towns which the power-loom has called into being.'<sup>61</sup> Many male labourers in rural Durham were engaged in mining activities: around 14,000 at the start of the nineteenth century, rising to 150,000 by 1911. Henley reported in 1867 that he had found the condition of the agricultural population 'entirely different from that of Northumberland; in fact, the manufacturing wealth of the county has so absorbed the population that a pure bred Durham farm labourer is very rare.'<sup>62</sup> Although mining is rarely discussed as a feature of rural work many of these communities were little more than large villages, especially in the first half of the century.<sup>63</sup> At Esh Winning and Ushaw Moor no house building took place until the 1860s, previous to which workers lived in the surrounding hamlets.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> A.D. Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming, 1910-1912* (London, 1913), p. 124.

<sup>60</sup> William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London, 1915), Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 23 September 1832, p. 552.

<sup>61</sup> Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales*, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> 1867-8, *Report of the Commissioners on Women's Employment*, p. 57.

<sup>63</sup> Reay, *Rural Englands*, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Moore, *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics. The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 64.

There was almost no employment available for women within the mining industries of the North East, even before women were banned from working underground in 1842. In the following year there was discussion in parliament as to relaxing this measure, as it was said to have been causing many families much hardship.<sup>65</sup> The Mines and Collieries Act was the first piece of gender-specific employment legislation, but it had almost no impact in the North East. Women stopped being employed underground some time after 1750, although local records fail to make clear why this self-imposed ban took place on the northern coalfields. Not only did women stop working underground but few seem to have carried on any surface work either. The pay book of Pontop Pike colliery in 1786 records a number of girls employed at bank, though none underground.<sup>66</sup> However, the census records of the nineteenth century show only a handful of women employed above ground in Durham and Northumberland, despite many hundreds being engaged in this work in neighbouring counties. Many Durham mining communities were isolated from any other form of industry. The lack of available employment for females could place a stress on families. Angela John records the incident of a miner from Durham who relocated his family, which included seven daughters, to Wigan as he 'could not hope to find work for them all in his native town.'<sup>67</sup> The impact of Methodism may have inculcated some resistance to women working under and above ground, though this was not the case in areas such as South Wales, where there was also a strong commitment to nonconformity.<sup>68</sup> Some explanation may be found also in the lack of infrastructure in

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<sup>65</sup> Jane Mark-Lawson and Anne Eitz, 'From "Family Labour" to "Family Wage"? The Case of Women's Labour in Nineteenth-Century Coalmining', *Social History*, 13 (1988), p. 163; Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of their Brow. Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1984).

<sup>66</sup> Edward Lloyd, *Co-operation in Crook and Neighbourhood. 1865-1915* (Pelaw, 1916), p23.

<sup>67</sup> John, *Sweat of their Brow*, p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25; Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics*.

newly emerging collieries. In 1851 the imbalance in the population of Crook in favour of males was explained by the 'fact that the demand for houses could not be met, and miners had to take lodgings.'<sup>69</sup> This explanation becomes problematic in the period after colliery owners began house building projects, and fails to help explain the sexual division of labour in the early part of this period.

The female relatives of miners faced special problems related to their men-folk's work. Jack Lawson, who was brought up in Boldon Colliery, Durham, recalls the efforts his mother and elder sister endured: 'And how they worked! Clean! They rubbed and scrubbed, washed and dusted, from morning until night ... when the pit worked, the cleaning started again as soon as it ended .... When I grew to years of understanding I vowed that the wrestle and risk of the pit was infinitely preferable to life in that kitchen.'<sup>70</sup> Colliery villages in the region were said to have been 'almost without exception [in] ... a miserably filthy condition.'<sup>71</sup> As well as cleaning duties females would often also be responsible for ensuring that male relatives were fed at work: 'Well, sir, when I get to the bank I'm very ready for my breakfast .... My mistress knows better nor to keep me waiting when I come to bank. If I expect to ride (ascend the shaft) at ten o'clock, she has the coffee hot by nine o'clock, in case I shall be sooner nor I thought.'<sup>72</sup> The exhaustive nature of such tasks could be exacerbated by shift patterns that resulted in men working during the night: 'The colliery produced coal as much by the pounding of the pit wife's "poss" as by the nicking of the pitman's pick.'<sup>73</sup> The organization of the

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<sup>69</sup> Lloyd, *Co-operation in Crook and Neighbourhood*, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> Jack Lawson, *A Man's Life* (1932; London 1949), pp. 30-31.

<sup>71</sup> Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*, p. 135. See also, 'Northern Collieries', *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, August 1842, p. 250-51.

household remained the primary – and full time – task of the female relatives of miners, but it seems likely that there were many females who took up paid work prior to marriage, albeit related to the domestic role that women performed in these communities, such as charring.<sup>74</sup>

The census records a disproportionate number of females engaged in service in County Durham; in 1851, 33% of occupied females were recorded as a general domestic servant; this compares to 23% for Great Britain.<sup>75</sup> Around two fifths of these workers were located within the principal towns of the county.<sup>76</sup> In Sunderland just over 37% of occupied females were recorded in this category, though in Gateshead the figure was only 29%. The average for the areas outside these principal towns was 32%. In 1901, just over 38% of occupied females in County Durham were recorded as domestic indoor servants. In urban areas this figure was 36%, in rural areas 45%. Almost three quarters of general domestic servants in Durham were employed in urban areas. The situation had reversed from that at mid-century where the majority of domestic servants were to be found in rural areas. However, the percentage of occupied rural women engaged in general domestic service had risen in this period. Young single women within mining communities predominantly took work in domestic service and it seems likely that where there was no paid work to be had some would have moved to more urbanised areas to find such employment. The census enumerator books of 1861 and 1881 for Bournmoor, County Durham, centred upon the Bournmoor (or Lambton) colliery would suggest this.

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<sup>74</sup> For a similar discussion relating to South Yorkshire see, Andrew Walker, "'Pleasurable Homes'? Victorian Model Miners' Wives and the Family Wage in a South Yorkshire Colliery District', *Women's History Review*, 6 (1997), pp. 317-36.

<sup>75</sup> Census 1851. Amended figures as above.

<sup>76</sup> 4,090 of the 10,189 female workers recorded as general domestic servants were enumerated in Durham city, and the boroughs of Gateshead, South Shields and Sunderland. Only general domestic servants have been counted so as to exclude categories underrepresented in rural areas such as hotel workers etc.

Of the unmarried children over the age of twelve resident with their parents a higher proportion were male than might be expected: 60% in 1861 and 65% in 1881.<sup>77</sup> This disproportionate distribution suggests that as many as 40% of females born into this community had moved out. In households headed by a coal miner the employment rate for women in 1881 was less than 9%. If only direct relatives, wives and daughters, are considered the figure falls to less than 6%.<sup>78</sup>

A much greater percentage would have performed unpaid domestic tasks within their households, or assisted neighbours and relatives. The work these women performed, although unpaid was connected to the work of the men within their community: the lives of both men and women in these communities were shaped by the rhythms of the coal industry. Here, the responsibilities of women were shaped by male labour but these duties were essential to the effective operation of their men-folk's work. A similar masculine industry – fishing – also relied upon unpaid female labour, though here there was a firmer connection between the tasks men and women performed.

Fishing was a family enterprise involving the labour of both men and women. Male relatives often went out in the same boat together. A boating accident at Newbiggin at mid-century was said to have paralyzed the energies of the fishermen, 'every one seeming overpowered with gloom at distress .... The fishermen and their wives occupying themselves with comforting the bereaved relatives of the deceased.' The situation was made worse by 'one very painful circumstance in the melancholy affair, in consequence of families forming boats' crews – nearly the whole of the sufferers were

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<sup>77</sup> National Archives (Hereafter NA), RG9/3758, 1861; NA, RG11/4978, 1881.

<sup>78</sup> NA, RG11/4978.

related.<sup>79</sup> Although women did not themselves go out in the boats they would assist male relatives in their work through a number of related tasks, not least in the launching of boats from the shore, in addition to their domestic work and chores such as collecting fuel from what had washed up on the shoreline.<sup>80</sup> For example, during the line season women would bait the lines for male relatives going out to sea. Gathering the bait at low tide was a task made worse where demand outstripped supply. In such cases the women would have had to walk a number of miles to the next spot where bait could be readily found. The bait then had to be hooked to the line, a task which could take up to six hours. If, the following day, the sea was too rough to take the boats out the stale bait would have to be unpicked from the lines and fresh bait found.<sup>81</sup> The fishermen alone would not have been able to undertake such work without vastly expanding their numbers. It was thought 'impossible for the fishermen to work shorelines without the help of their women.'<sup>82</sup> In 1856 when fishermen from Northumberland were encouraged to fish from West Hartlepool those that travelled to the new port brought their wives and children with them to bait their lines.

Although unpaid, the work these women did was essential to the livelihood of the family. As well as line baiting, women would perform other tasks necessary for the upkeep of fishing equipment. The sketchbook of Edward Hodgson, a railwayman with the North Eastern Railway, includes a sketch he had drawn at Cullercoats pier in 1877 of fisherwomen mending nets.<sup>83</sup> A colony of artists had been attracted to Cullercoats in the

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<sup>79</sup> NRO, ZSW 640, 'Miscellaneous Letters and Papers of Local Matters'.

<sup>80</sup> The following section is informed by, George Muirhead, 'The Fishing Industry of Northumberland and Durham 1780-1914', Ph.D. thesis (University of Newcastle, 1992); NRO, BRO 608, 'Interviews'. Also, James G. Bertram, *The Unappreciated Fisher Folk: Their Round of Life and Labour* (London, 1883).

<sup>81</sup> See also Newcastle Central Library (hereafter NCL), Robert Jopling, 'Baiting Lines', *Art Journal* (1887).

<sup>82</sup> Muirhead, 'The Fishing Industry of Northumberland and Durham', p. 37.

<sup>83</sup> NRO, 2232/1, 'Small Sketchbook'.

last quarter of the nineteenth century and their paintings reveal much about the working life of women in such villages.<sup>84</sup> Robert Jopling's *Sea Fret*, 1884, depicts a fisherwife assisting in bringing the catch ashore as boats were dragged up onto the beach.<sup>85</sup> Other paintings show women gathering mussels from rock pools,<sup>86</sup> gathering firewood for the winter,<sup>87</sup> and taking fish to market.<sup>88</sup> Fishermen were unable to both catch and sell fish and so the women were relied upon to sell the produce. Although (as described below) the increasing number of fishmonger shops took some of these duties away from women, they continued to sell their families' catch. Though increasingly this took place within their local communities, there were those who sold the produce in a wider area. The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* complained in 1864 of the 'Cullercoats fisherwomen, the slaves that they are, carrying the heavy creels of fish to our large town, which some of the oldest of them have done, winter and summer, for over fifty years. It is not a good condition of society when women are turned into beasts of burden.'<sup>89</sup>

Women met their relatives as they came ashore, they also assisted when disaster threatened to strike. Although the artists at Cullercoats frequently portrayed waiting or grieving women in their homes, there were many paintings that recorded the assertive actions these women took. Arthur Hardwick Marsh's *Lighting the Beacon*, 1887, depicts a number of women lighting and manning the beacon during stormy weather to guide those at sea to shore: 'to face such a storm is to be stung by salt spray and pelted by sand

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<sup>84</sup> In Cullercoats, this colony of artists also provided additional income to those women who were painted.

<sup>85</sup> This and following paintings can be found in the Laing Art Gallery exhibition catalogue, Laura Newton with Abigail Booth Gerds, *Cullercoats. A North-East Colony of Artists* (Bristol, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> Winslow Homer, *The Mussel Gatherers*, c.1881-1882.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Jopling, *Winter Fuel*, 1910.

<sup>88</sup> Victor Noble Rainbird, *Fish Market*, n.d.

<sup>89</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle and Northern Counties Advertiser*, 5 January 1864.



and shingle until the blood comes, as we know by experience.<sup>90</sup> Although the painting was originally called *Men Must Work and Women Must Weep*, it clearly depicts women doing more than helplessly weeping, rather they are a lifeline to their male relatives. John Charlton's *The Women*, 1910, represents a real life incident from 1861, described as 'a spiriting rendering of a buffeting storm of snow and sleet with the strenuous figures of heroic women dragging a lifeboat.'<sup>91</sup> As Newton points out, the painting is interesting in that the distance in time between the event and the painting, as well as the distance in place between these rural women and working-class city dwellers of the early twentieth century allowed the women to be viewed without the usual sexual anxieties that surrounded urban women.<sup>92</sup> The painting may have been read more as a reinforcement of the traditional role of women in their communities – in the painting they are literally pulling together. However, it does represent the occurrence of an actual event and one that Charlton was likely to have heard through the tales and recollections of fisher-folk rather than surveying fifty-year old newspapers. Although the telling of such stories may have invoked a sense of these women's place in the community, it is likely that they would have also reinforced the role that women had in assisting their men-folk in the everyday tasks of their work.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the low levels of fisherwomen recorded within the census, women clearly played an important role in the work performed within these communities. Valerie Hall has found in interviews that the wives of fishermen considered themselves their

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<sup>90</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 17 February 1891, discussing this painting, quoted in Newton, *Cullercoats*, p. 92.

<sup>91</sup> *Art Journal*, 1910, quoted in Newton, *Cullercoats*, p. 85.

<sup>92</sup> Newton, *Cullercoats*, p. 86.

<sup>93</sup> See also the accounts of women involved in rescues in, Jill Mitchell, *The Story of Cresswell Lifeboats* (Cresswell, 1986).

husbands' 'business partners'.<sup>94</sup> The identity they constructed was based as firmly upon their role in fishing activities as their place in the home: traditional clothing continued to be worn by women into the twentieth century. It seems also that many of the tasks women performed were not strictly defined by gender. If men returned early from fishing they too might assist in baiting lines, collecting mussels and mending equipment. However, the importance of fisherwomen needs to be put in context. They were only ever a small minority amongst women in the north east. Less than one tenth of one per cent of male workers in Durham, 1911, were recorded as fishermen, in Northumberland just over half a per cent. In rural areas there were located some unique employments for women, the most prominent of which were also closely related to family enterprises, or at least interlocked with the work of their men-folk. This link is less obvious in urban areas which were able to retain and attract large numbers of young women.<sup>95</sup>

### *Urban Employment*

Gleadle has argued that the 'employment of working-class women during the second half of the nineteenth century is testament to the continuing traditionalism of vast sectors of the British economy.'<sup>96</sup> Female labour was mostly in trades related to their domestic role, such as cleaning, laundry and needlework. Factory work is an obvious exception. Women factory workers may have been the subject of much debate nationally but urban female employment in this region was not concentrated in the way it was, for example, in

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<sup>94</sup> Valerie Gordon Hall, 'Differing Gender Roles: Women in Mining and Fishing Communities in Northumberland, England', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27 (2004), p. 526.

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter One, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 109.

Bradford where young women made up over a quarter of the labour force in worsted textiles, a trade which attracted women from the surrounding areas in Yorkshire.<sup>97</sup> The number of females engaged in factory employment within the North East was never great, though there were areas of significant employment.

Frederick Morton found female textile workers scattered in many areas of both Northumberland and Durham at the end of the eighteenth century. With the exception of the mill work at Darlington and carpet weaving at Durham and Barnard Castle, much of this work was based within the home. A typical example given in *The State of the Poor* is of the wife of a miner in Stanhope who spun lint as well as taking care of the house.<sup>98</sup> Although in 1838 a number of woollen and flax mills could be found in the region, the majority of these employed only a handful of people. The woollen mill at Morpeth employed only seventeen people, five of whom were female and only one was over twenty one years old. By mid-century there were few textile mills and factories left in the region as the impact of railways served to make those small industries that remained economically unviable. Those that remained were at Barnard Castle, Durham and Darlington, though these declined in importance over the century. The carpet factory at Durham had employed almost 300 women in the 1830s, though employed only 300 persons in total by the end of the century. At Barnard Castle, carpet manufacture provided employment for the 'greater proportion of the population' in 1850, though the number of carpet factories had fallen by that stage from six to four.<sup>99</sup> Whilst young men and women were employed at these factories, their work was not always regular: 'Frequent complaints are made by the weavers of the interruptions to regular work,

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<sup>97</sup> Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England* (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 149.

<sup>98</sup> Eden, *The State of the Poor*, pp. 170, *passim*.

<sup>99</sup> DCRO, UB/BC/111, Report to the General Board of Health on Barnard Castle, 1850, p. 5.

caused either by an over-abundant population, or by some defective arrangements in the economy of the manufacturing establishments'.<sup>100</sup> In contrast, the Pease mills at Darlington remained, superficially, prosperous and it was the longest lasting textile manufacturer in the region for this period.

In 1831, the population growth of Darlington was credited to 'a Railway from the Coal Mines to nearly the mouth of the River Tees and to the Steadiness of the Linen and Woollen Manufactories'.<sup>101</sup> The Pease family had established a woollen business at Darlington as early as the 1740s.<sup>102</sup> In the early 1870s the Peases commissioned new buildings to be constructed, the mill-chimney becoming 'the most prominent sight to the traveller approaching Darlington', much to the disdain of some residents who complained that their once picturesque town had been spoiled by this edifice that 'marred everything by its size and clumsiness'.<sup>103</sup> Despite the visible dominance of this industry, by the late nineteenth century the factory was no longer the great employer of men it once was as the improved railway links which boosted the coal industry also served to draw men into better paid related industries. However, much pride had been taken in the textile industry on the River Skerne, especially in the earlier period. Celebrations, such as that by Woolcombers in 1816, involved both male and female workers. In commemoration of their patron Saint, Bishop Blase, a procession involving many hundreds of workers took place. At the head of the procession, a worker dressed as the Bishop was followed by a 'Shepherd and Shepherdess, each on horseback ...the latter wearing a green habit, and a

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<sup>100</sup> Reverend Dugard, quoted in DCRO, UB/BC/111, General Board of Health, p. 18.

<sup>101</sup> 1831 Census, quoted in Cookson, *The Townscape of Darlington*, p. 69.

<sup>102</sup> Pease, *Henry Pease*, p. 1. A date ten to fifteen years earlier is suggested by W.C. Parker, based upon a discussion with Henry and Edward Pease, DCRO, D/Wa 5/7/43. On the Pease family in general see, Anne Orde, *Religion, Business and Society in North East England. The Pease Family of Darlington in the Nineteenth Century* (Stamford, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> DCRO, D/Pe 12/7, 'The Athens of South Durham', 1876, pp. 3-4.

large gypsy hat ornamented with flowers, carried on her knee a mock lamb.<sup>104</sup> A procession through Darlington took place shortly after the 1832 Reform Act was passed, at which banners were displayed from worsted weavers, linen-weavers, flax-dressers, bleachers, carpet-weavers, and woolcombers.

In 1817, a fire destroyed the Pease-owned Low Mill, which specialised in mechanised spinning and employed predominantly children and women. Edward Pease reported to his uncle and aunt that 'no life has been lost, nor any personal accident befallen anyone – to us the accident is heavy, but feeling dwells less on that, than the thought of 5 or 600 men, women & children so suddenly thrown out of employ or a livelihood, at a time so difficult'.<sup>105</sup> The population of Darlington at this time was just under 7,000, making this mill a considerable employer.

It is unclear as to what extent these female employees identified themselves primarily as textile workers. Although women were prominent among the woolcomber's procession in 1816, this trade was dominated by men in the early nineteenth century. A Woolcombers' Sick Association was formed by the Peases during 1813, providing up to ten shillings a week for sick workers. Though this association was wound up before mid-century, the scheme for women and children lasted only four years. It was discontinued at the time of the 1817 mill fire and was not re-established.<sup>106</sup> There seems further to have been reluctance amongst Darlington women to engage in textile employment, though the growth of new male-dominated trades, had freed up much of this work. In 1849 a tea was given at Darlington Central Hall for three hundred women and girls from

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<sup>104</sup> *Durham County Advertiser*, 10 February 1816.

<sup>105</sup> DCRO, D/Ho/C 10, Edward Pease to Hadwen and Margaret Bragg, 13 February 1817.

<sup>106</sup> DCRO, D/XD/95/1, Account book of Woolcomber's Sick Association, D/HP/40, Cash book of the Woolcomber's Sick Association; DCRO, D/HP/39, Cash book of the Women and Children's Association.

the worsted mill.<sup>107</sup> The 1851 census records 230 women over 20 years of age engaged in textile manufacture in the district of Darlington. Though only eighty five women were recorded within worsted manufacture, this figure may not be entirely inaccurate, given that only around three hundred females of all ages were in regular employment at the worsted mill only a few years previous. However, in 1850 Francis Mewburn, a solicitor to the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company, recorded that the 'parents of the lower classes in general do not encourage their children to go to the mills. At present the manufacturers have machinery lying idle for want of hands to work it, to their great loss.' He contrasted this to the situation in Yorkshire and Lancashire where women and children would take up all the available employment in mills, and suggested that 'the difference in the character of the people may lie in the fact that in Darlington the lower classes, except in times of general distress, are not out of employment, and are therefore not compelled to send their children to work.'<sup>108</sup> The prosperity accompanying the growth of male-dominated industries related to the railway industry would have accounted for part of this difference. Edward Pease thought wages of many male labourers in Darlington to be too high during the 1840s and that the mill could not compete, though the mill business had suffered problems in recruiting hands from the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>109</sup> As far back as 1761, only a few years after mill work had begun in earnest at Darlington,<sup>110</sup> Arthur Young recorded that the master at the mill could easily set many more to work and employ numerous women and children .... and that, in

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<sup>107</sup> A.E. Pease (ed.), *The Diaries of Edward Pease* (London, 1907), p. 270. This tea was given in celebration of the birthday of J. Whitwell Pease.

<sup>108</sup> Mewburn, *The Larchfield Diary*, p. 105.

<sup>109</sup> Pease, *The Diaries of Edward Pease*, p. 231.

<sup>110</sup> DCRO, D/XD 95/7, 'Henry Pease & Co Ltd., Combers and Worsted Spinners: Bicentenary, 1752-1952'. This pamphlet records that in the early eighteenth century the Pease owned buildings functioned primarily as centres of exchange.

general, there need never be an unemployed person in Darlington.<sup>111</sup> The extent of domestic manufacture during the eighteenth century and the continuance of such work into this period might better explain the reluctance of many women to work in the factories. Out-work continued throughout this period and was especially prominent amongst villagers living in the vicinity of Darlington.<sup>112</sup> The textile work available both at the mill and within the home helps explain the above average percentage of young women in Darlington at this time.<sup>113</sup>

A fire at the Priestgate Mill in February 1894 again threw hundreds out of work. Local papers reported that the majority of the four hundred workers were females, mostly of the poorer classes. Many were said to have been the family breadwinner and a relief fund was set up for those affected.<sup>114</sup> These reports imply that the majority of female workers were not 'topping-up' the family income, but were essential contributors. They also suggest that the work was often transitory, taken either as a last resort when there was no male support, or for a short period of time prior to marriage. This view is reinforced by the reaction of the owners to attempts to organize the female workers.

At the commencement of *The Woman Worker*, a monthly paper published by the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) to report on the activities of women Trade Unionists, there was no branch in the North East and scarcely any female Trade Unions.<sup>115</sup> Julia Varley, of the NFWW, addressed a meeting outside Priestgate Mill in September 1908, presided over by Councillor Robinson.<sup>116</sup> Here she voiced concern over

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<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Sunderland, *A History of Darlington*, p. 69.

<sup>112</sup> William Page (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Durham*, vol. ii (London, 1905), p. 316.

<sup>113</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>114</sup> *Darlington and Stockton Times*, 3 March 1894; *Northern Echo*, 27, 28 February, 10 March, 5 May 1894.

<sup>115</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1907.

<sup>116</sup> The following paragraph is based upon DCRO, D/XD/95/7, File of Papers Relating to the History of the Mill. The papers are predominantly newspaper cuttings.

the rates of pay, which were lower than those earned in Yorkshire, and the need for a space to be provided for the 'girls' to eat their lunch, as currently they were 'obliged to take it in the street.' Varley held subsequent meetings at the Temperance Hall and met with the Darlington Trades and Labour Council. Although Varley had enjoyed success elsewhere, most notably with the female small-chain makers of Cradley Heath in the West Midlands, little seemed to have come of her attempt to unionize the female textile workforce of Darlington. In the press, the managing director of the mill, Walter Brunskill, appealed to the memory of the 'very generous and practical sympathy shown to our workers by the then mayor and the people of Darlington during the time when a portion of the mills was being rebuilt, after a disastrous fire in 1894', whilst refuting the claim that wage levels were too low, concluding that he was 'satisfied that no injustice is being done.' There were few letters in reply calling for more reasonable wages. In person, Brunskill addressed the mill workers with a point-by-point rebuttal of the claims made by Varley and refuted the benefits of a female trade union.<sup>117</sup> He contended that the branches in Yorkshire could not be compared to that in Darlington and that the wages paid at Darlington of five and six shillings, as discussed by Varley, referred only to learners, whilst more experienced workers earned more. He went on to state that 'the owners of these Mills have always taken into account the distress which would have inevitably follow the closure of the mills. They are aware that the wages are not high, but they are such as in the meantime they can barely afford.'<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, he argued that

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<sup>117</sup> DCRO, D/X/1215/54, Notes of Address by Walter Brunskill, 24 September 1908. There does not seem to have been the same degree of hostility towards the attempts to unionise these female workers as was experienced elsewhere. For example, in 1906 at Paisley, Mary MacArthur was forced off a lecture platform; see, Catriona M.M. MacDonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland. Paisley Politics, 1885-1924* (East Linton, 2000), p. 160.

<sup>118</sup> This is probably not as disingenuous as might be expected. The mills secured little profit throughout the majority of this period and seem to have been allowed to remain open as long as the Peases wished to



'you have been spoken to as though you necessarily had to live on the wage you earned; but generally speaking the wages in question only apply to young workers living with their parents, and in some cases there are two, three or more of a family employed here, and living together.' An offer was made that 'if any have joined I will return the money.'

In 1909, Brunskill announced that there would be a pay increase for female workers, though not for piece-rate workers or men, who worked mostly as overlookers and enginemen.<sup>119</sup> Superficially, it would seem that the pressure instigated by Varley's visit had borne results. It would seem to have played a part, but it is likely that Directors were seeking a solution to problems related to the high turnover of female employees. Training hundreds of new workers each year led to broken bobbins, excess waste and imperfections in finished goods, serving to exacerbate the disadvantages the Darlington mill suffered from being some distance from the centre of the trade. In 1907 a third of the female workforce had been employed for less than a year.<sup>120</sup> Five years later, out of a total workforce of around 550, 257 females left the factory that year with 271 joining. The largest percentage of these workers were dismissed, suggesting they were unable to attract the most competent workers.<sup>121</sup> Female workers who left to get married, mind the home, or because their husbands found employment accounted for sixteen per cent of female leavers. The pay increase made in 1909 was related to the length of employment

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maintain one aspect of their family tradition. However, the worsted spinning business, following difficulties during 1902, was registered as a new limited company in 1903. Although three members of the Pease family were directors and the business traded as 'Henry Pease & Company Ltd.', the family no longer had any control over the enterprise.

<sup>119</sup> DCRO, D/X/1215/61, Draft Speech, 27 July 1909; PP, 1908, xci, *Report of An Enquiry by the Board of Trade into Working Class Rents, Housing and Retail Prices, Together with the Standard Rates of Wages Prevailing in Certain Industrial Towns of the United Kingdom*, p. 175.

<sup>120</sup> DCRO, D/X/1215/54, Notes of Address.

<sup>121</sup> DCRO, D/X/1215/66, 'Work People Left and Started', 1912. 36% of both men and women who left the works were dismissed. In 1912, 64 men left and 71 started. Interestingly, the 1901 census seems to underestimate by around a third both male and female employment at these works.

and was only available initially to those who had joined before 1906. As the figures from 1912 suggest this initiative was not successful.

Despite an employer that was keen to recruit and reward long-serving staff, there seem to have been few female workers who continued this employment for any great length of time. Many must have chosen not to work after marriage, whilst others moved into other employment. A little over 5% of female leavers in 1912 left to take up employment in domestic service, roughly the same number of male and female leavers who secured other unspecified work.<sup>122</sup> The work here does seem to have been significant enough to delay female marriage rates, as seen in Table 2.7. Such employment opportunities within factories were not always evident elsewhere in the region.

In 1860, the Northumberland and Durham branch of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women reported that 'many hundreds of women are girls are to be found in the lower and dirtier departments of the factories on the Tyne.'<sup>123</sup> The census of 1861 records around 320 females in such employment at Newcastle, although exactly what number constituted 'many hundreds' leaves us unable to clarify its accuracy.<sup>124</sup> What is clear though is that out of almost 37,000 females over fifteen years of age living in the Newcastle area, only a handful were employed at a factory. John Wigham Richardson, a prominent industrialist, in discussing the district of Newcastle as an industrial centre in 1889 highlighted as a prominent feature the lack of employment for women: 'A comparatively insignificant number of female hands work at the potteries and at paper making, and in the white lead and tobacco works; but we have none of the large

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<sup>122</sup> It would be expected that the latter category referred predominantly to men who had secured other work.

<sup>123</sup> Emily Davies, *Thoughts on Some Questions Relating to Women* (Cambridge, 1910), p. 30.

<sup>124</sup> Census 1861, Division X, Northern Counties, p. 796.

mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire, with their hundreds of factory girls'.<sup>125</sup> He went on to assert that 'it is believed that the absence of factory employment for women tends to a higher moral tone.'<sup>126</sup>

Female employment within tobacco factories did not seem to be considered as an activity perilous to the morality of those engaged at it. Although there were a number of smaller tobacco factories in the region, by the second half of the century this industry was dominated by large manufacturers on the Tyne. At Alnwick, the tobacco trade was celebrated by a local commentator as late as 1878, but few of either sex were employed here. The esteem this trade was held in seems to have arisen mostly as a consequence of the decline of other industries through competition with Newcastle, the author complaining that Alnwick could not be described as a manufacturing town despite previously successful industries.<sup>127</sup> Consequently, the manufacture of tobacco at Alnwick came to be dominated by men, many of whom had been apprenticed since childhood. The situation at Hexham was more typical for those manufacturing tobacco outside of Newcastle. Here the decline in trade allowed the committee of Hexham Soup Kitchen to take up the several unoccupied rooms at Smith's Tobacco Manufactory.<sup>128</sup>

During the period of Newcastle's second significant population growth, the number of females recorded as employed within the manufacture of tobacco grew from 185 in 1881 to 269 in 1891. Female labour was said to be 'much used' within these

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<sup>125</sup> J Wigham Richardson, 'Introduction', in J. Wigham Richardson (ed.), *The British Association. Handbook to the Industries of Newcastle and District* (Newcastle, 1889), p. xiii. Richardson (1837-1908), started his business in 1860 with a small shipyard at Walker. He was later a founder member of the North of England Institute of Mining Engineers, president of the Newcastle Economic Society, and a Justice of the Peace for Northumberland. His limited company, Wigham Richardson & Co. Ltd was formed in 1899, amalgamating with Swan, Hunter in 1903.

<sup>126</sup> Richardson, 'Introduction', p. xv.

<sup>127</sup> NCL, Local Tracts 27, Anon, *The Trade and Manufacture of Alnwick, with an Account of a Visit to the Tobacco Factory of Mr James Heatley* (Alnwick, 1878).

<sup>128</sup> NRO, 604/1, Hexham Soup Kitchen Committee Minute Book, 1841-1880, 18 October 1880.

factories, but the opening of a Will's factory in the 1890s added to the competition and by 1901 the number of women recorded within tobacco manufacture had fallen to 210. In Northumberland, only eight women were recorded within tobacco manufacture beyond the Newcastle District. Just under 200 were recorded in County Durham, though the majority of these were enumerated on the south bank of the Tyne at Gateshead, with a small number at Sunderland. The fact that no tobacco workers fell ill during the cholera epidemics in the first half of the century was pointed to as evidence that this was a healthy calling.<sup>129</sup> Though there was some debate as to how healthy the work was, a local doctor thought that new hands quickly became accustomed to the conditions which initially triggered 'nausea, headache, and giddiness'.<sup>130</sup> The work predominantly involved the making of cigarettes and cigars. Although women were thought to be slower in production as compared to men, it was suggested that as 'the cigar trade is one that requires deftness and skill in manipulation, and as both of these are possessed by women's fingers, the occupation is one particularly suited for women. The work is neither hard nor laborious; it is quiet, and on the whole well paid.'<sup>131</sup>

In contrast, white lead factories assigned the most physically demanding and dangerous tasks to female employees. The white lead industry in the North East had developed upon the River Tyne and along with those manufacturers based in London was the major location for production in England.<sup>132</sup> A small number of factories on the rivers Tyne and Wear involved in the metal trades and rope making employed a small

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<sup>129</sup> John Harve, 'Tobacco', in Richardson (ed.), *The British Association*, p. 233.

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Oliver, 'Miscellaneous Trades', in Thomas Oliver (ed.), *Dangerous Trades. The Historical, Social, and Legal Aspects of Industrial Occupations as Affecting Health, by a Number of Experts* (London, 1902), p. 793.

<sup>131</sup> Oliver, 'Miscellaneous Trades', p. 795.

<sup>132</sup> D.J. Rowe, *Lead Manufacturing in Britain. A History* (London, 1983).

number of women, but were not as significant in the context of female employment as white lead factories.<sup>133</sup> These works traditionally employed female labour in the setting and emptying of white lead stacks, a task which exposed them to poisonous lead dust. Around 600 women were employed at white lead factories in Newcastle. A national campaign to remove women from this employment gathered pace during the 1890s, despite there having been little change in the processes and associated dangers of the trade: the *Newcastle Chronicle's* investigation into the poor of Newcastle in 1850 had highlighted the case of a woman who had worked at the white-lead factory for four months and been ill three times during that period.<sup>134</sup> The *Penny Magazine* had reported on the white lead industry at Newcastle in 1844. Although it found the dominance of women within the sector 'curious', and linked female non-employment with progress, it reported that the women looked healthy and seemed to suffer little inconvenience from the work.<sup>135</sup> The report's circular logic is striking: the industry must be safe because it employed women, and because women were working there the industry must be safe. Jane Long argues that in describing the appearance of healthy female bodies and determining the industry as safe, rather than engaging in empirical research, the report fails to take a serious medical approach, and represents a general 'confidence in the good prospects of industry.'<sup>136</sup> Whilst the account in the *Penny Magazine* was not intended as a medical text it does, however, reflect the popularity of physiognomic analysis, in

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<sup>133</sup> 1908, *Report of An Enquiry by the Board of Trade*, *passim*.

<sup>134</sup> Anon, *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, from the *Newcastle Chronicle* (Newcastle, 1850).

<sup>135</sup> University of Durham Palace Green Library, CKS III/45/1, "A Day at the Tyne Factories", *The Penny Magazine*, Supplement, August 1844.

<sup>136</sup> Jane Long, 'The Colour of Disorder: Women's Employment and "Protective" Intervention in the Lead Industry in Victorian England', *Women's History Review*, 7 (1998), p. 524.

assuming that the bodily appearance reflected overall health.<sup>137</sup> The medical research of Dr Oliver, a physician to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, was central to claims that women suffered far more severely from the impact of lead poisoning than men.<sup>138</sup> The findings of Oliver were used within the sensationalist reports on white lead poisoning at Newcastle, published by the London *Daily Chronicle* and later by Robert Sherard in *The White Slaves of England*.<sup>139</sup> The Home Office came under pressure to legislate through the outcry created by these reports, in addition to the complaints it heard from male and female trade unionists: Gertrude Tuckwell agreed with the 'growing feeling that measures needed to be taken'.<sup>140</sup> Legislation was passed banning women, effective from June 1898, from any work that might expose them to white lead dust.

There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm from the Newcastle press regarding the investigations into white lead poisoning. Shock was expressed more that the '*Chronicle* appears to think it has got hold of something which is quite new' rather than the conditions it described.<sup>141</sup> This is unsurprising given that the London press reports, despite having focused on the impact lead poisoning had on the female body, concluded that all men and women should be banned from such employment. Other commentators on the issue, such as the journal *Engineering*, agreed.<sup>142</sup> There was little passion for a movement that sought not only to regulate male employment, but to restrict it. In 1892,

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<sup>137</sup> K. Flint, *Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>138</sup> See further, Jonathan Mood, 'The Social Construction of Medical Knowledge: Dr Thomas Oliver and Government Intervention in the White Lead Trade, c. 1890-99', forthcoming.

<sup>139</sup> *Daily Chronicle* 15, 21 December 1892; Robert Sherard, *The White Slaves of England* (London, 1898). For a discussion of newspaper reports into the conditions of women's work elsewhere in England at this time see, Carolyn Malone, 'Campaign Journalism: The *Clarion*, the *Daily Citizen*, and the Protection of Women Workers, 1898-1912', *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), pp. 281-97.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Carolyn Malone, *Women's Bodies and Dangerous Trades in England, 1880-1914* (Suffolk, 2003), p. 46.

<sup>141</sup> *Newcastle Daily Leader*, 16 December 1892.

<sup>142</sup> *Engineering*, 22 December 1893.

the region was still suffering economically from strikes in coalmining and engineering.<sup>143</sup>

At this time two labour issues dominated press coverage, the agitation for an eight-hour day and the creating of employment for those men 'who have got no work to do.'<sup>144</sup> The conditions female white lead workers worked under were dismissed as a minor issue.

Although there were thought to have been only around 600 women employed at white lead works on the Tyne in the 1890s (not a large figure compared to factory employment elsewhere in the country) it was nevertheless one of the most significant employees of female factory labour in the county.<sup>145</sup> 600 is in any case a significant underestimate of the number of women financially reliant upon white lead work. Many took up employment at the factories only for short periods. The Tyneside works of Messrs. Foster, Blackett & Company reported that they employed 118 females. However, in the previous eight months 443 different women had been on their books.<sup>146</sup> Messrs. James & Company, Ouseburn and Northumberland works, reported an average of 78 women workers a week in May 1893, although they had employed 250 different women since the beginning of the year.<sup>147</sup> The manager of the works at Hebburn, on Tyneside, described white lead work as being seasonal for many of his female employees: 'There is a certain class which come from North Shields, which always lie off, as it were, in the summer, when they get employment by counting the fish, and hawking them, and others do not come when the fruit is cheap. They hawk the fruit, and

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<sup>143</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 'Commercial Supplements', 26 December 1892.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 November 1892.

<sup>145</sup> Thomas Oliver, 'Lead and its Compounds', in Oliver (ed.), *Dangerous Trades*, p. 299. Just over 300 men worked at lead works, though engaged in different tasks to the women, prior to 1898.

<sup>146</sup> TWAS, ACC 1512/14881, T.M. Legge, Medical Inspector of Factories, *Report on the Lead Works of Cooksons & Co. and the Causes of Lead Poisoning to the Employees*, 1898. In the same period 293 males had been employed, though the figure reported had been 167.

<sup>147</sup> PP, 1893-4, xvii, *Report by the Departmental Committee on the Various Lead Industries*, Minutes of Evidence, Qs. 1208-13.

others work in fields, get field work.'<sup>148</sup> A petition was sent to the Home Secretary, Asquith, during the period when he was considering whether or not to use his power under the Factory and Workshop Act, 1895, to ban females from their traditional work within white lead factories. Over 500 female white lead workers put their name to it, claiming that they had no other means of livelihood.<sup>149</sup> This represents almost the entire female working population of these factories and over a quarter of the approximate number of women reliant upon white lead work at some point during the year.<sup>150</sup> That these women thought that this work, necessitating carrying up to 72lbs of lead in stove rooms heated to high temperatures in order to dry the lead, was all that was available to them, says much of the employment opportunities available to women in the region. Many of these workers walked from Gateshead, Jarrow and North Shields to work at the Tyne factories. However, even given the lack of other available employment, this work seems to have been taken as a last resort, in times of extreme hardship, by a minority of women. Joseph Kelly, the representative of the Tyneside and National Labour Union, heard complaints from a number of female workers. Kelly, who wanted better conditions for both male and female workers, claimed that the 'women who work at this particular class of work are generally women driven there by sheer force of circumstances over which they have got no control'.<sup>151</sup> Many were brought to work at the white lead factories through the death, disability, or abandonment by their husbands. This is borne out by evidence from female workers themselves. One female worker, Mary Ann Ingram, when interviewed by the committee in 1893, was asked what her husband did: 'I

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<sup>148</sup> 1893-4, *Departmental Committee*, Q. 2241.

<sup>149</sup> NA, HO 45/9856/B12393AC, Petition of Female White Lead Workers, 9 June 1896.

<sup>150</sup> Given the figures recorded by Messrs. Foster, Blackett & Company and Messrs. James & Company, between 1800 and 2000 women may have taken employment at white lead works during a year.

<sup>151</sup> 1893-4, *Departmental Committee*, Q. 2663.



have the misfortune not to be with him. He is one of the bad husbands. I would not have been working now if he had been what he ought to have been.'<sup>152</sup> Helen Ogle Moore and Edith Hare reporting for the Society for the Employment of Women, concluded from their interviews with female white lead workers in Newcastle that 'many only work for a short time, to keep things going while their husbands are sick or out of employment.'<sup>153</sup> It is also clear that the women did not enjoy the work or find much satisfaction from it. Cookson & Company Ltd., Newcastle, mechanised the process that women had previously performed in the early 1890s. Despite the reduction in the female workforce, those women who were redeployed celebrated the new manufacturing process:

I think you...have seen that famous verse:

“Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.

Mr Hutchings has won the day,

The stoves are all done away,”

which the women have put up in their dining-room to show their pleasure at the abolition of the stoves.<sup>154</sup>

Although some women were redeployed within the white-lead factories others found that a trade in which women had participated in on Tyneside for most of the nineteenth

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<sup>152</sup> 1893-4, *Departmental Committee*, Q. 2351.

<sup>153</sup> H. Moore and E. Hare, 'Report to the Society for the Employment of Women on the Work of Women in the White Lead Trade, at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, March, 1895', in J. Boucherett and H. Blackburn (eds.), *The Condition of Working Women and the Factory Acts* (London, 1896), p. 80.

<sup>154</sup> 1893-4, *Departmental Committee*, Q. 758.

century was now closed off to them. A trade which the most impoverished had relied upon.

There was no attempt to unionise these women workers at white lead factories. The Women's Industrial Defence Committee and the Women's Employment Association sent reports and deputations to Asquith, but they expressed more concern that banning women from a certain trade under the Factory and Workshop Act would set a precedent for the removal of women from other employments. The female workers themselves were thought – through their inconsistent employment and poverty – unable to be unionized. The *Woman Worker* recorded little success in unionizing women of any trade within the North East. Reports from the region concentrated more on the limited success achieved in politicising women in joint gatherings with the Independent Labour Party.<sup>155</sup> Unsurprisingly, official discussions concerning unemployment in any trade concentrated on men.<sup>156</sup> Perhaps symptomatic of the lack of employment opportunities for women, during times of region-wide distress even those charitable organisations led by women concentrated mostly on relieving the worst consequences of the poverty through finding work for men. The 1879 Darlington Mayor's Relief fund sought to find work for women, but this only extended as far as charring.<sup>157</sup> More typical were the attempts to distribute clothing, blankets and food amongst poor women, rather than find employment for them.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> *The Woman Worker*, September 1907 to January 1910, *passim*. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Five.

<sup>156</sup> For example, NRO, ZCU, Distress in the North Eastern District, Being a Report ... to the Local Government Board, 11 February 1879; PP, 1895, viii, *Select Committee Report on the Distress from Want of Employment*.

<sup>157</sup> DCRO, D/X 944/4, The Mayor's Darlington Relief Fund, 1877-1879.

<sup>158</sup> For example, *The Woman Worker*, 18 November 1908, letter relating to Stockton.

Most of the employment available to women were not in casual trades that could be easily unionized. Much of this work would have gone unrecorded by the census and it is only through incidental evidence that it is revealed. The diary of Thomas Davidson, a magistrate clerk, records a number of women who were fined 'for causing obstructions in the streets...selling apples' and other items.<sup>159</sup> There were a number of attempts to regulate street trading in this period, almost always impacting negatively upon females. The Mayor of Newcastle, in 1829, instructed that 'as the girls with their baskets selling fruit and other wares in the streets were now a great nuisance, and were acting in violation of the street act, he requested ... distinct notices ... that they should cease ... otherwise the provisions of the street act would be strictly enforced against them.'<sup>160</sup> In 1864, the Corporation of Tynemouth sought to reduce the number of streets traders. The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* described the Corporation as having become suddenly attacked with 'a fit of putting down basket women, hawkers of organs and apples, and are determined that no one shall sell an orange or a biscuit, or boil a kettle for a cup of tea, on the Long Sands at Tynemouth'.<sup>161</sup> The Corporation introduced a toll of £5 a year, or 2s 6d per day during Easter and race week – prohibitively high for 'the struggling poor'. Although many women undoubtedly continued to trade without paying, they now risked being penalised for their poverty. In the early 1900s Newcastle City Council passed bye-laws necessitating girls under the age of sixteen to be licensed by the Watch Committee, who enforced the regulation. A condition of this license was that they were to be accompanied by a parent or guardian at all times. Consequently, this legislation 'almost

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<sup>159</sup> TWAS, DX/55/1/2, Diary of Thomas A. Davidson, clerk to Newcastle Magistrates, 1845.

<sup>160</sup> H.A. Mitchell, *A Report of the Proceedings in the Mayor's Chamber, Newcastle upon Tyne, During the Mayoralty of Geo. Shadforth, esq., 1829-30* (Newcastle, 1830), p. 11.

<sup>161</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 6 June 1864.

put a stop to street trading by girls.<sup>162</sup> Although public opinion was divided, boys under the age of sixteen were allowed to continue trading without regulation. They were said to 'supply a great public want, and ... must be a great convenience.' That female labour could provide such a 'convenience' and that they could often make an important contribution to family income was disregarded. In the case of boys, the chairman of the Watch Committee argued that they should be allowed to trade as normal because 'numberless parents have very small and precarious incomes, particularly so at the present time and if it were not for the money earned by their children their poverty and privations would be very great.'<sup>163</sup>

Women were squeezed out of trades they had traditionally been employed in through other means, though not always intentionally. Women selling fish in towns were frequently celebrated in literature and song. Vendors were said to have distinctive cries in order to distinguish themselves from other traders.<sup>164</sup> At least one fish-woman, and renowned eccentric Mrs Margaret (Peggy) Potts, supplemented her income from selling her husband's catch by buying up stale cheese at a cheap price and selling it at inflated prices.<sup>165</sup> In Newcastle these women had traditionally sold fish along the Quayside. The redevelopment of Newcastle in the early nineteenth century led to the creation of new market space. Though the 'fish-women had ... a dinner in their market on the New Quay, and got so merry that they footed it "on the light fantastic toe" before parting',<sup>166</sup> they

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<sup>162</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 16 December 1908, contained within NRO, NC/6/5, The Newcastle-upon-Tyne Police-aided Association for the Clothing of Destitute Children.

<sup>163</sup> *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 16 December 1908.

<sup>164</sup> Robert King (ed.), *Old Tyneside Cries* (Tynemouth, 1924), p. 5.

<sup>165</sup> TWAS, SX 773/1/2, Sunderland Notables Scrapbook. In her younger days she was said to have made hundreds of pounds by smuggling goods and outwitting Custom House officers.

<sup>166</sup> John Sykes, *Local Records; or Historical Register of Remarkable Events which have Occurred in Northumberland and Durham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Berwick-upon-Tweed*, vol. ii (Newcastle, 1866), p. 317.

found the new location inconvenient and a detriment to trade. More serious to the trade of these women across the region was the growth in the number of fishmonger's shops after 1850, that served to diminish their trade.<sup>167</sup> The Milk Market at Sandgate was named after the custom of women selling milk during the mornings at the nearby pant. By the 1870s this trade was said to be almost obsolete as small chandler's shops across the town had taken to selling milk throughout the day.<sup>168</sup>

That there could be a demand for temporary or short-term work is clear from the responses to adverts in the local press. The *Evening Chronicle* described the scene at the County Hotel after it had advertised that barmaids, barmen and waiters were required for the forthcoming Royal Agricultural Show: 'So many applicants put in an appearance in the lane leading from Westgate Street to the central railway station, that it was amusing to watch the good-natured struggle going on as to who should enter the building first and so secure an early interview.'<sup>169</sup> Such employment, though intermittent, played an important role in contributing to the family budget. The extensive building work of the early nineteenth century at Newcastle attracted many labourers from beyond the region and it was not unusual to see female 'bricklayer's clerks'. As the rebuilding and extension of the town centre was completed the demand for labourers faded and so too it seems the place of women in the industry: the death of the town's last female bricklayer's labourer, Elizabeth Johnson, was reported in 1848.<sup>170</sup>

Lower middle-class women could also be vital contributors to the family income, especially in the early part of this period. As Davidoff and Hall have noted, the number

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<sup>167</sup> George Muirhead, 'The fishing Industry', p.397.

<sup>168</sup> TWAS, ACC 1074/ 230, Cuttings Book on Newcastle History, c. 1850-80.

<sup>169</sup> *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 4 July 1887.

<sup>170</sup> TWAS, ACC 1074/230, Cuttings Book.

of women recorded as engaged in business declined in the first half of this century.<sup>171</sup> By mid-century the association between domesticity and middle-class women was lodged in popular thought: 'That women of the middle ranks should, throughout their best years, have no definite occupation – that their life should be marked by a purposeless tone, or by misdirected aim ... are serious evils'.<sup>172</sup> There seems to have been a decline in businesses run by women in the first part of this period, though the evidence is slight, and the numbers recorded small. Trade directories offer some evidence and those from the region show a reduction in numbers. However, there are a number of problems with such evidence. Trade directories were not a complete list of businesses within a district and as such they give an incomplete picture. They cannot tell us if businesses were jointly or even partially run by female relatives, or if the decline in female proprietors represents an actual fall in the number of women involved in the business at a more informal level. The withdrawal of middle-class women from business activities may well have been seen as a refinement of domestic duties rather than an imposition of a new ideal. The *Tyne Mercury* published an article in 1803 for the 'purpose of benefiting mankind': 'when beginning in business, we are generally led to take a companion along with us ... a little advice to our partners might not be altogether in vain'.<sup>173</sup> The success of business, it was suggested, often rested on the economy of the wife and that a young women should be trained in skills she would find useful in such an enterprise: 'a young Tradesman, in selecting a *partner for life*, should prefer one that will make a good Housewife, to another that can gabber bad French.' That the middling classes were said to be 'struggling daily to

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<sup>171</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, *passim*.

<sup>172</sup> John Duguid Milne, *Industrial Employment of Women in the Middle and Lower Ranks* (1857; London, 1984), p. v.

<sup>173</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 4 January 1803.

maintain their rank in society' in the early part of this period would have made such skills essential to the maintenance and success of business endeavours.<sup>174</sup> There is some evidence for this for the first half of this period from the Quaker community.

By the 1830s, middle-class Quakers in Newcastle, who had previously lived above their shops in the centre, resided in a small community on the outskirts of town.<sup>175</sup> One would assume that the separation of home and work would have entailed a withdrawal from the business by the women of the family. This seems not necessarily to have been the case. George Richardson frequently left his wife Eleanor in sole charge of the grocer business during the 1820s and 1830s whilst he engaged in ministerial tours.<sup>176</sup> At other times Eleanor maintained informal connections with the grocery business. Margaret Bragg continued, until her death in 1840, the 'parental care she and her husband had exercised over the young men and apprentices employed in the [drapery] shop.'<sup>177</sup> The women in later generations of these families seem to have taken a less active interest in the family business, although they were more prominent in local philanthropic endeavours.

As the recent work of Hannah Barker has shown, the perception that in the early part of this period shop trade moved from a predominantly male endeavour to an almost exclusive one can be overstated.<sup>178</sup> There were certainly at this time businesswomen confident of their right to participate in their trade and who would appeal against any

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<sup>174</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 16 February 1819.

<sup>175</sup> E. Pumphrey, *Summerhill Grove*, (Newcastle; Privately Published, 1898).

<sup>176</sup> George Richardson, *Journal of the Gospel Labours of George Richardson, A Minister in the Society of Friends, with a Biographical Sketch of his Life and Character* (London, 1864).

<sup>177</sup> J. Steel (ed.), *A Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends, 'in Scorn called Quakers' in Newcastle and Gateshead, 1653-1898* (London, 1899), p. 128. See further, Jonathan Mood, 'Women in the Quaker Community: the Richardson Family of Newcastle, c. 1815-60', *Quaker Studies*, 9 (2005), pp.204-19.

<sup>178</sup> Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women. Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760-1830* (Oxford, 2006).

injustice to their business, even if this may not have been dealt with satisfactorily by authorities. For example, in 1841 Ann Crozier, who had run a shop selling meat and groceries, petitioned the Newcastle Watch Committee concerning the behaviour of her brother-in-law. Ann Crozier had run this shop in partnership with her two sisters Jane and Margaret. In October 1840 Margaret married a local policeman, William Barron. A dispute between the newly-wed couple and the two sisters led to Barron and other men breaking into the shop between five and six in the morning, whilst Ann and Jane were at the market buying goods for the shop. He loaded a cart with 'valuable articles of private property' from the house, as well as many items and property from the shop.<sup>179</sup> The Watch Committee held a special meeting to investigate the charge. A settlement was proposed, agreed to by the Croziers but not Barron. He refused on two occasions to agree to any settlement or return the property. Two months after the incident the property had still not been returned. The Watch Committee settled the matter by dismissing Barron from his office of Police Constable.<sup>180</sup>

One of the major problems regarding the changes in married women's categorisation made in the census from 1881 is highlighted by the figures for female inn keepers or publicans. Before 1881 women consistently accounted for at least half of all those employed in this trade: for example, in 1861 women in Northumberland and Durham accounted for 57%, and in 1871, 56%. This of course includes those who were returned as the wife of an inn keeper or publican. If this category is excluded the percentage of females in the trade drops to 37% in 1861 and 27% in 1871. For 1881 the figure (excluding wives) is 20% and is 21% in 1901, but 29% in 1891 and 35% in 1911.

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<sup>179</sup> TWAS, ACC 564/214, Petition of Ann Crozier of Newcastle, Spinster Referred to the Newcastle Watch Committee, Concerning William Barron's Removal of Property and Conduct, 5 May 1841.

<sup>180</sup> TWAS, ACC 564/123, Watch Committee Report, 1841.



Although there is clearly a discrepancy in how these women were recorded after 1881 it is seen that that a large amount of the publicans in the region recorded at the census – slightly over 2,450 in 1861 and just under 5,500 in 1911 – were female and many more besides the official numbers would have worked alongside relatives. Trade directories can be misleading in this sense, as they list only a portion of inns (and other places of business) and only list the owner, who is often identified by their initials rather than first name or title. From the *General Directory for Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead* in 1824 less than one in ten of publicans can be identified as female; at Durham City in 1899 the figure was just over one in ten.<sup>181</sup>

Whilst female business owners were predominantly from the lower-middling classes, many working-class women were employed within shops and pubs. However, certain difficulties arise when quantifying the number of women employed at shops, as the changing categorisation of shops and trades can lead to large fluctuations in male and female employment between census years. In 1891 around 30% of those employed in shops trading food, drink and general items, in the urban sanitary districts of Newcastle, Gateshead, South Shields and Sunderland, were female.<sup>182</sup> If the figure for butchers are removed the percentages are higher than 35%. The actual numbers employed in these categories in 1891 were approximately 700 in Sunderland, 390 in South Shields, 550 in Gateshead and 1,250 in Newcastle. In County Durham as a whole around 28% were female, whilst in Northumberland the figure is 32%. Around half of the females

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<sup>181</sup> *A General Directory for Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead, and Places Adjacent, 1824* (Newcastle, 1824); DCRO, D/X 640/1, List of Public House in Durham City, 1899.

<sup>182</sup> 1891 Census. These figures are from urban sanitary districts of populations over 50,000. The figures are taken from dealers in beer, food (milk seller, cheesemonger, butcher, provision, fishmonger, corn, baker, confectioner, greengrocer) and general shopkeepers (general dealers, pawnbroker, costermonger, hawker, street seller).

employed in this category in each county were located in the four urban sanitary districts with populations of over 50,000. The percentages relating to these trades is comparable to those elsewhere and would suggest that the region followed broad national patterns: Sheffield, for example, had only a similar percentage of females in these trades, 31%. However, despite Middlesbrough having more food outlets per head than any other place in the North East, except for Newcastle, only 20% of those employed in these trades were female.<sup>183</sup> Despite the apparent gentility of shop work, such employment often involved long hours and poor conditions.<sup>184</sup> There was some agitation amongst male drapers and apprentices in the region during 1834, and again in 1864. In 1834, the 'Shopmen and Apprentices of Drapers' took out a front page advert calling on the 'Ladies of Newcastle and its Vicinity' to only shop during the hours of eight in the morning and seven in the evening so that they may close early.<sup>185</sup> In 1864, an article was run calling on all drapers to close at six in the evening during the winter months, in line with 'other first class firms'.<sup>186</sup> There seems to have been little protest specifically from female shop workers until after the Shop Hours Act of 1886. Between May and July 1887 there were a number of letters and articles in the press concerning the call for the early closure of shops in Darlington. An editorial on May 28 described the sixty six hour weeks the men and girls employed at large shops in Darlington had to endure, but despite these conditions and poor pay 'they dare not openly combine, and the fear of the result of secret

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<sup>183</sup> Taylor, *Policing the Victorian town*, p. 104.

<sup>184</sup> Christopher P. Hosgood, "'Mercantile Monastries': Shops, Shop Assistants, and Shop Life in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (1999), pp. 322-52; Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work. Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914* (London, 1973), pp. 103-140.

<sup>185</sup> *Newcastle Press*, 2 August 1834.

<sup>186</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 11 January 1864. See also letters, 12 January 1864. The issue was however briefly resurrected at Newcastle in 1881; see, NCL, L.042, *The Early Closing of Shops and Other Places of Business. A Series of Sermons* (Newcastle, 1881).

combination paralyzes their efforts towards united action.'<sup>187</sup> A letter in the following issue wrote that 'surely there is not a man with any heart at all who will fail to see that 66 hours are too much for any man or woman to work, and keep body and mind in health.'<sup>188</sup> Little progress seems to have been made. The shop workers did not unionize and, despite an 'appeal to the Ladies, to step forward and use their influence on our behalf', the paper was left to call upon tradesmen to grant a half-day holiday that it 'might be remembered in connection with the Jubilee year of the Queen.'<sup>189</sup>

As elsewhere in the country, recorded employment amongst women was dominated by service and domestic work. Higgs has suggested that the census figures vastly overestimate the number of domestic servants, many of whom, he proposes, might better be categorised as agricultural labourers.<sup>190</sup> It is difficult to argue though that the large number of domestic servants in towns and cities too far from rural areas to have engaged in agricultural work should have been recorded differently, as in urban areas perhaps only a handful of male and females worked also as agricultural labourers. The experience of servants could differ greatly, as a large number of duties could be classified as service.<sup>191</sup> The number of female domestic servants is thought to have increased throughout most of this period, reaching a peak in the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>192</sup> County Durham and Northumberland would seem to have more in common with non-industrial regions in relation to the employment of domestic servants in this period. Whilst in counties such as Lancashire, Cheshire and the West Riding more

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<sup>187</sup> *Northern Review*, 28 May 1887.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 June 1887.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 June, 9 July 1887.

<sup>190</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Occupational Censuses and the Agricultural Workforce'.

<sup>191</sup> See Bridget Hill, *Servants. English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996); Edward Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work'.

<sup>192</sup> T.M. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820-1920* (London, 1976), p. 112.

women were employed in textiles than domestic service, the North East in general followed the trend of mainly agricultural counties.<sup>193</sup> In 1851 around 25% of occupied females of all ages in Great Britain were returned in the categories of domestic service.<sup>194</sup> In Durham the figure was 38%, in Northumberland 37%. Perhaps surprisingly, the percentages were higher in urban areas than rural. In Durham City 41% of women were returned as domestic servants. In South Shields, 40%; Sunderland, 42%; Newcastle 43%; Tynemouth 41%. In comparison, the city of Carlisle recorded a figure of only 22%.<sup>195</sup> The large numbers of young females evident in the towns in this region seem mostly to have been employed in domestic employments. The districts where the percentage of women employed who were engaged in domestic service most closely followed the national average were those which offered other employments, such as at Darlington, where textile work was available, and Hexham, where agricultural work was prominent.<sup>196</sup> Though many women moved to urban areas, most seem to have taken up employment in those tasks most resembling unpaid domestic tasks. The percentage of employed women engaged in domestic duties in urban areas for 1891 are similar: Newcastle, 41%; South Shields, 44%; Sunderland, 43%, Middlesbrough, 43%.<sup>197</sup> The percentages thereafter fall, dropping to below 35% in both County Durham and Northumberland by 1911, suggesting a widening of opportunities for women in the last few decades of this period.

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<sup>193</sup> Duncan Bythell, 'Women in the Workforce', in Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault (eds.), *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>194</sup> Census 1851. These are amended figures.

<sup>195</sup> These figures refer to boroughs, except for the cities of Durham and Carlisle.

<sup>196</sup> Around a quarter of women employed at Darlington and Hexham were engaged in domestic service, but the published figures for these districts are only available for those females aged twenty years and above.

<sup>197</sup> These figures refer to urban sanitary districts of a population exceeding 50,000.

Towards the end of this period a number of employments opened up for women, although these were taken up predominantly by those of the middle-classes. The Young Women's Christian Association of Newcastle reported in 1900 that it had lodged women engaged in trades such as teaching, typing, book-keeping, foreign correspondence, nursing and post office work.<sup>198</sup> The opportunities that arose for women with the growth of department stores accounts of some of this, but relates also to the rapid increase in the employment of clerks and teachers.<sup>199</sup> The number of teachers in Durham and Northumberland doubled between 1871 and 1881, and rose almost a quarter again in the proceeding decade; well above overall population growth for the region.<sup>200</sup> In 1871, 64% of teachers were female in Durham and 61% in Northumberland. By 1891, 71% of teachers in both counties were female and by 1901 three quarters of all teachers in Durham were female, and only slightly below this in Northumberland. Not only had there been a huge increase in the number of teachers following the 1870 Education Act, but the dominance of women within this traditionally 'feminine' profession became even more pronounced.<sup>201</sup> Similarly the number of commercial or business clerks employed in the region doubled between 1891 and 1901. In 1891 women formed less than 6% of those employed in this category, by 1901 the figure was close to 15% and rose to over 25% by 1911 in Northumberland. The percentage of females employed in general or local government (including post office work) also rose in this period, from around 10% in 1891 to almost 17% by 1911, during which time the persons employed in this category doubled. For working-class women opportunities of formal paid employment seem to

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<sup>198</sup> TWAS, ACC 658, Records of the Newcastle YWCA.

<sup>199</sup> On department stores see, Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (Leicester, 1995).

<sup>200</sup> See Chapter One, p. 25.

<sup>201</sup> On the Education Act and its limitations see, Gillian Sutherland, 'Education', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *Cambridge Social History*, vol. iii: *Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 119-169.

have been limited, especially in areas dominated by coal and metal industries, most significantly at Middlesbrough. Although working-class women seem mostly to have sought employment at times of hardship, relying upon higher than average male wages at other times, when they did find work in urban areas it was low paid and often temporary. The work seems not to have become part of their identity as it did for men in coalmining and shipbuilding.

It should be recalled though that the overwhelming majority of women recorded as employed in the North East were young and unmarried: less than 9% of the female workforce was married in 1911. Again, the census represents an underestimation, but the work married women performed would often have been of a casual, intermittent nature. A report into the occupations of the recipients of out-door relief in 1914 commented on the 'large number of women who are forced to rely on charring and domestic labour for their maintenance and that of their families.' However, although the report was 'forced to acknowledge the self-denying sacrifices which a very large number of widows and children exercise, in the maintenance of their independence', it was thought that 'owing to the lack of organization of women's employment, and provision for the care of their children, a large number seek poor law relief ... rather than trust to the uncertainty of casual earnings of charity.'<sup>202</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This has not been a comprehensive account of every female employment undertaken in the North East during this period; rather it has examined some of the most important

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<sup>202</sup> Gladstone, *Wages and Pauperism*.

trades and trends. It is clear from the above discussion and previous chapters that not only were formal employment opportunities for women in the urban North East limited, but that which could be found was treated by employer and employee alike as short-term and most often taken up either before marriage or as a last resort. Few female workers in urban areas would have expected to be engaged in paid employment throughout their lives and, like the white lead worker whose idle husband had led her to factory employment, considered themselves unfortunate during the periods when they did. There seems to have been little sense of women identifying with such paid employment.

This is not the case in the professions that opened up for women at the end of this period, in teaching and as business clerks, but these seem to have been taken up by very few working-class women; whilst these professions opened up others became closed off to women and although working-class women worked at pubs and shops few owned those businesses. Those jobs in which a sense of pride can be most readily identified were available in rural areas and were related to the employment of family members or the male household head. Female farm workers, fish-wives and the (albeit unpaid) wives of coal miners identified themselves with the culture of work in these employments, although they were centred upon male labour.

It is often asserted either explicitly, or more often implicitly, in discussions of working-class politics and women in the nineteenth century that their experience and identification with employment was necessary to their politicisation. One would tend to expect that from the discussion so far that the involvement of working-class women in politics would be limited in this region. Superficially, especially in the latter period, this seems to be the case. However, the following chapter argues that much female

politicisation and political involvement has been misunderstood through the concentration by historians on sources that are not only more abundant but anticipate the politics and political developments of the twentieth century.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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# POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITY PROTEST

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Keir Hardie told me some time ago that down in Lancashire he got crowds of women at his meetings, but in Northumberland and Durham only a few came. The reason he gave was that the women of Lancashire and Yorkshire are working for their living in the same way as the men, and have strong trade unions, so that when he talked to the men he interested them also, because their lives would be affected by the measures he spoke of. Up here it is different; the women don't go out to sell their labour, and the benefits promised don't interest them because it won't affect them personally.

*The Northern Democrat*, 'Women's Page', November 1907

Female involvement in political activities did not surface during the nineteenth century, nor did female participation in organised politics begin with the suffrage campaigns. A great deal of female participation in politics and protest across the nineteenth century was anticipated in and a development from the eighteenth century. The extent to which the public sphere of political activity was closed off to women during the mid-Victorian period can be overstated,<sup>1</sup> and the period preceding the second reform act need not be

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Contesting the Male Polity: The Suffragettes and the Politics of Disruption in Edwardian Britain', in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power. British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (California, 2001), p. 205.

told as a series of defeats for the political lives of English women:<sup>2</sup> the broadly conceived political activities of women during this period often stands in contradiction to the rhetoric of separate spheres. However, women of the aristocracy, the middle classes, and working classes experienced and participated in politics in different ways.<sup>3</sup> Although the reasons for involvement differed between women – as it did between men – there is perhaps for the majority of this period and for the majority of working-class women a continued understanding of political involvement as an extension of traditional family roles. The motivation for female involvement in early nineteenth-century movements such as Chartism did not necessarily represent a break from older forms of participation. Whilst for an aristocratic woman, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, involvement in politics may have represented a more distinct public role in 'high' politics, female working-class participation may have stemmed from a similar sense of duty and obligation. Aristocratic women often acted on behalf and for the benefit of husbands, family and friends, and many working-class women did the same, albeit under differing circumstances.<sup>4</sup> The turn towards organised and respectable electoral politics, rhetorically focused upon the male head of a family distinguished by its domestic order, does not therefore exclude the possibility of a continuance amongst females of their traditional role in political activities.<sup>5</sup> It was claimed repeatedly throughout this period, although with greater conviction at the beginning than the end, that the male vote

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<sup>2</sup> Amanda Vickery, 'Introduction', in Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> A similar point is made by Anna Clark, 'Women in Eighteenth-Century British Politics', in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds.), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 570.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Chalus, '"That Epidemical Madness": Women and Electoral Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.), *Gender in Eighteenth Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London, 1997), pp. 151-78. See further, Elaine Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life c.1754-1790* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Cragoe makes a similar point in relation to electoral politics, '"Jenny Rules the Roost": Women and Electoral Politics, 1832-68', in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860. The Power of the Petticoat* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 165.

represented not only his own interest but that of his family,<sup>6</sup> and later that individual rights were subsumed within the interests and representation of the community as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Women, like many men for much of this period, were involved in political activities – despite lacking the vote – that often extended beyond formal political engagement. The criticisms and trivializations of female political activities made during this period often stands as testament to the existence and significance of their importance.

Although there are periods when rural activities took on great importance, much of this chapter will examine political activities and protest in urban areas. Working men in rural areas remained disenfranchised until the 1880s, and even after often remained too isolated to be effectively canvassed. In contrast urban areas frequently acted as a magnet for discontent – and the discontented – and became a focal point for action. Whilst towns such as Darlington and Newcastle retained their reputation amongst the local genteel as places of leisure, they were increasingly perceived as centres of entertainment for the lower orders. In reality, the more genteel leisure facilities, such as the Literary and Philosophical Society and the Assembly Rooms, survived, albeit with a greater dominance by the widening middle classes, whilst facilities for the rapidly expanding working classes grew up around them. People came together in towns for leisure, pleasure, employment and protest; the urban environment could be a charged environment. The general segregation between the working class and upper middling class in leisure is confirmed, as elsewhere, in a segregation of residency. This is neatly

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., in 1797 Fox explained during a debate on the reform of the parliamentary system that women were excluded from the franchise due to their natural dependence upon the governance of male representatives. James Mill, in his *Article on Government* of 1820, gave further backing to this stance when he explained that women need not have direct political representation as they were already represented through the interests they shared with male voters. This sentiment was expressed locally in *An Address to the Electors of South Shields, and to Reformers Generally Throughout the United Kingdom, On Universal Suffrage, Voting by Ballot, Triennial Parliaments, and Church Reform. By an Elector* (Newcastle, 1835), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (Oxford, 1982), p. 4.

exemplified in a report in the *Newcastle Daily Leader* of 1901 that described the cramming that occurred on the tram to working-class Byker. The reporter asked why the driver did not consider trying a route to the suburban and pleasant reclines of Gosforth:

At first sight it would seem as though the conveyance of residents in the aristocratic suburbs to and from the city would, just at this time, be a source of no profit to the brake drivers. There being an abundance of passengers on these routes .... The fact of the matter is that the brakesmen who go 'Byker way' prefer, for many reasons, to drive their own class. Seldom or never does a man or woman of the working classes complain that a vehicle is overcrowded and uncomfortable, and they tolerate without a murmur inconvenience which middle-class folk would promptly protest.<sup>8</sup>

The urban (and political) environment was shared but not on equal terms and the working classes were not always so placid as they appeared to be on the trams.

This chapter looks at political activities in a broad sense; although I distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' politics, these need to be seen as two aspects of a whole, rather than different types of political activity. One of the major themes of this section is the relation between these two sites of politics and the failure of late nineteenth-century 'formal' politics to connect with the 'informal' political concerns of working-class women. It is worth noting here an issue relating to popular politics and the factors which constrained female involvement. Although many movements during the nineteenth century can be categorised as popular, not all of them can be said to be accessible.

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<sup>8</sup> *Newcastle Daily Leader*, 5 July 1901.

Putting to one side that many movements appealed specifically to males, there is the issue that, specifically towards the end of this period, many political activities congregated around the work place. Although the issues at hand might be understandable to interested females, the location of meetings could deny the pre-dominantly unemployed women of the region access even if they were not formally excluded. The extent to which male-dominated political activities were a form of socialising, a site of recreation and camaraderie away from the workplace and with a wider reach than the pub has also perhaps been understated. Contemporaries were concerned towards the end of the nineteenth century that working-class men were just as interested in being part of the hustle and bustle of the crowd as in the actual politics.

The North East has a strong history of male working-class political activity in this period, most often associated with the mining population; these activities often had as much to do with improving conditions of male labour as a commitment to radicalism.<sup>9</sup> There were, as elsewhere, moments at which shifting notions of rights within working-class radicalism opened up the space for females to claim rights alongside men, for the 'People' to be defined by women as well as men, as can be seen in the debates relating to Peterloo and the Poor Law. There were, however, also moments at which chivalrous rhetoric penned back such shifts, perhaps best exemplified during the early part of this period during the Queen Caroline Affair. Part of the danger in examining male-dominated radical politics is that such shifts in male-dominated spheres might serve to hide the continuation of female activities and motives. Aspects of continuity tend to be underplayed in studies of nineteenth-century North East politics. The dominance of

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<sup>9</sup> See Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*; James A. Jaffe, 'The "Chiliasm of Despair" Reconsidered: Revivalism and Working-Class Agitation in County Durham', *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), p. 28.

Liberal politics, even during the early twentieth century, is often underestimated, whilst there are frequent implications that the sharpening of class identities occurred early in this region and with some force. Much of the following discussion looks at evidence taken from mining communities, as well as those working on the rivers Tyne, Wear and Tees. There has been a tendency though to exaggerate the class-based identity of miners, who saw themselves primarily as miners rather than as part of a wider working class from who they were in any case geographically isolated: members of unions did not necessarily perceive themselves as part of a working-class fraternity committed to the advancement of all.<sup>10</sup> Conversely skilled workers employed on the rivers of the region tended to live in specific areas of towns such as Newcastle by the early twentieth century, but the extent to which they were cut off from the wider working-class of the district can be overestimated.<sup>11</sup> The region experienced tremendous and rapid economic change over the nineteenth century, but this did not create simple class-based identities.

Whilst the dominance of class-based politics in this period has been debated and reassessed by a number of historians, the supposed 'taming' of popular politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the impact upon general female participation needs to be more fully explored.<sup>12</sup> As Jon Lawrence has argued, there remained a tolerance of robust forms of 'street politics' throughout this period, that the rationalization of the mob into the respectable crowd has been overstated.<sup>13</sup> Even if the respectability model is accepted, it is a poor explanatory factor in the supposed withdrawal of women from

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<sup>10</sup> G.R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886-1918* (Oxford, 2004), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Benwell Community Project, *Private Housing and the Working Class* (Newcastle, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991); James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993); Patrick Joyce (ed.), *Class* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, Chapter Seven.

politics after mid-century. It has been argued, most recently by James Vernon, that although the potential for female participation increased as politics emerged from the pub and away from the mob, the resultant emphasis within the discourse of respectability upon the role of women as a supportive helpmate to their male relatives served to consign them to a domestic role.<sup>14</sup> When, it may be asked, were the majority of women not posited as a helpmate to men in politics, or their actions articulated as emanating from within their domestic role? Dorothy Thompson has suggested that women's involvement in political action was brought about through changes in the style of politics, that it was the medium rather than the message that encouraged engagement.<sup>15</sup> Whilst this is applicable in political movements during the first three-quarters of this period it fails to account for the continuation of activities away from parliamentary politics through this period, activities that were primarily located within the local vicinity, a 'public' sphere that was more easily accessed by both women and men. The following discussion will centre primarily upon three interrelated aspects of female political participation; 'informal' accessible politics; the participation – and non-participation – of women within organized 'formal' politics; and, the place of women at elections. The subject matter discussed may often be familiar but the focus upon working-class women in the North East over this time period brings a fresh perspective to these issues where evidence has frequently been dominated by an unrepresentative minority of women. The involvement in politics of the working-class women to be discussed was, it is suggested, more typical of the experiences of these women in England as a whole.

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<sup>14</sup> Vernon, *Politics and the People*.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists. Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1984), p. 121-22.

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## WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND ACCESSIBLE POLITICS: CAMPAIGNS, CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS, C. 1790-1870

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### *Women and Political Campaigns Before 1830*

War with France overshadowed the early decades of this period and although much of the secondary literature has focused on the impact of war upon the south coast of England, fear of invasion was strong also in the North.<sup>16</sup> Whilst a number of volunteer corps were raised from the north during this period, there was a clear distinction between such loyalism, manifested in a pledge to uphold national security locally, and the fear expressed when press gangs roamed the region, although the two positions were not mutually incompatible.<sup>17</sup> As such the female patriotism that Linda Colley has described can be exaggerated. If the 'unprecedented number of uniformed males, marching, parading and engaging in mock battles in every region of Great Britain brought a pleasant *frisson* of excitement into many normally quiet and deeply repetitive female lives',<sup>18</sup> the impressment of sons, brothers and husbands brought a shudder of fear and anxiety. Feelings of patriotism amongst women of the lower orders could easily be tainted by the grief of losing a loved one to the press gang. The popular song 'The New Keel Row' deals with the story of the impressment of a Tyneside sailor from his wife's perspective. She states her children, like their father, would be willing and ready to fight the French,

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<sup>16</sup> J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1997); See also NRO 4416/6/13, 'Order to Petty Constable, 15 September 1801'; NRO, 2955, Letter asking what number of carts would be required for the removal of the infirm and children from Kirkheaton, 18 September 1803; DCRO, D/X 488/19, 'Orders and Regulations in Case of Invasion', 15 March 1804.

<sup>17</sup> J.E. Cookson, 'The English Volunteer Movement of the French Wars, 1793-1815: Some Contexts', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 867-91.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Colley, *Briton's: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1992; London, 1994), p. 272.



but she wanted a 'peace that's steady, And breed cheap as lang syne.'<sup>19</sup> The *Tyne Mercury* reported on a number of occasions the patriotic activities of the ladies of York, who through a female committee, provided items of clothing to their 'countrymen in arms'. It went on to praise similar exertions in Durham, Chester-le-Street and Sunderland, whilst lamenting that they were unable to report 'one single instance of female patriotism in this town since the commencement of the war.'<sup>20</sup> The *Tyne Mercury* was, however, able to report the repeated actions of females in protecting men from press gangs, for whom 'deep passionate vengeance was sworn against them.'<sup>21</sup> When a press gang was discovered in Gateshead they were accompanied on their route by a number of women and children who sought to stifle their task: 'They addressed their retinue, who were of the humblest description, in the coarsest language of insult; and some old women, whose bones appeared to hang very loose in their skin, got such a *shaking* as they had not been accustomed to! The brutality of these men was made very conspicuous.'<sup>22</sup> Even in the more remote rural areas, women were organised to protect their menfolk upon the sight of a press gang. In Ford, the females of the village went from house to house dancing and singing,

Dance the tittery-tan, Marjorie,

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix for the full song.

<sup>20</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 20 December 1803. The lack of restraint shown at this time led one clerical justice from South Shields to declare that the press gangs had 'no authority for dragging Men from their Houses in a forcible manner'; NA, Adm. 1/2141 M42, quoted in Nicholas Rogers, 'Impressment and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in Norman Landau (ed.), *Law, Crime and English Society, 1660-1830* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (Oxford, 1999), p. 249. Here Gaskell describes in detail the resistance to press gangs at North Shields and the eventual seizing of over 250 men. Gaskell had stayed in Newcastle during 1829-30. From her hosts and acquaintances she sought out accounts of local events and would have been familiar with these events. See further, J.A.V. Chapple, 'Before "Crutches and Changed Feelings": Five Early Letters By Elizabeth Gaskell (nee Stevenson)', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 4 (1990), pp. 1-27.

<sup>22</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 10 May 1803.

Dance the tittery-tan,  
Yonder is the tender,  
Coming to take our men.

as a signal that a press gang was approaching. The men upon hearing this song were said to have concealed themselves by laying flat on the roof of the public house.<sup>23</sup> At Sunderland, upon the sign of an approaching press gang the men were reported as having pretended to be invalids or otherwise incapable.<sup>24</sup> Women were also known to have sued recently impressed men for fictitious debts, taking advantage of a 1758 statute that allowed the arrest of a seaman in the Royal Navy for small debts of £20 and above. James Dowell was served with a writ for a debt of £20 hours after his impressment at Newcastle, the suit being brought against him by his mother.<sup>25</sup>

There were also less typical incidents of individual daring by females. The sister of a man held at a house by a press gang resolved to aid his escape. She was given permission to visit him and, after she had entered the room he was held in, the door was locked and they were left alone for a few minutes. During this time they exchanged clothes and he was able to leave the house unmolested, apparently 'snivelling and piping his eye' as he did so. Upon the discovery of the swap and her release she was greeted by a large crowd who rewarded her with several pounds.<sup>26</sup> The collective action of females in defence of their community is also represented in the fate of Billy Korton, whose

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<sup>23</sup> Neville, *A Corner in the North*, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> DCRO, UD/SEA 38, Description of press gang at Sunderland, 1811.

<sup>25</sup> NA, Adm. 1/1498 (Bover), 22 March 1778, quoted in Rogers, 'Impressment and the Law', p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> M.A. Richardson, *Local Historians Table Book, of Remarkable Occurrences, Historical Facts, Traditions, Legendary and Descriptive Ballads, &c &c, Connected with the Counties of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumberland and Durham* (Newcastle, 1843), p. 122.

treatment at the hands of angry fishwives became part of nineteenth-century Tyneside folklore. Korton was suspected of informing the press gang of the whereabouts of a number of fishermen, whose wives in retaliation stripped, tarred and feathered him.<sup>27</sup> In most incidents women acted to protect their men-folk because they could not protect themselves against the demands war placed on the need for sailors. The disciplining of Billy Korton is a clear example of women regulating their own community and their right to do so does not seem to have been challenged.

Amongst women of the working classes there was undoubtedly a fear of the French that could manifest itself in a form of patriotism. This patriotism did not extend to supporting what they perceived as the imprisonment of their men-folk. Whilst patriotic societies at Sunderland and Durham may have provided a popular outlet for the expression of loyalism, the fear of press gangs allowed the realities of survival to mute such sentiments and ensure female participation was more numerous and vocal in actions against the perceived unfairness of organised wartime bodies. This sense of fairness is one that is repeated throughout the following discussion and is perhaps not too dissimilar from the moral understanding of labour that Colls identifies among mining communities.<sup>28</sup>

The renewal of radicalism after 1815, during the post-war economic depression, saw the emergence of wide-scale female radical protest on a national level. The first female radical society seems to have been formed at Blackburn in June 1819, *The Times*

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<sup>27</sup> See, 'The Newcassel Fishwives', in Matt C. James (ed.), *Sum Tyneside Songs: A Collection of Prize Songs &c in the Tyneside Dialect* (Newcastle, 1898), pp. 20-21. The song is reproduced here in the Appendix.

<sup>28</sup> Colls, *The Pitmen of the Coalfield*, *passim*

claiming its aims and objectives to be 'wicked and vicious'.<sup>29</sup> Similar societies sprung up around Manchester and elsewhere in the following months encouraged by the procession of female reformists at Rochdale in July, and in protest at the events of Peterloo in August.<sup>30</sup> As Bush has recently argued, this rally at St Peter's Field has considerable significance as it represents 'the earliest expression of organised female activity' amongst working-class women in British politics.<sup>31</sup> The subsequent 'massacre' of unarmed men and women in this crowd by a yeomanry under orders from local magistrates (who had endured consistent pressure from the Home Office to combat agitation 'either by the law or the sword',) followed swiftly by the 'Six Acts', brought protests from radicals nationwide.<sup>32</sup> It was little comfort to the authorities and upper classes that the political nation as a whole remained fearful of the mob and was quelled by patriotic public meetings and loyal declarations.<sup>33</sup> A great reform meeting was held on the town moor at Newcastle on 11 October 1819 to condemn the government and the magistrates of Manchester. Male radical reformers had met on numerous occasion during the summer of 1819, prompting some 'respectable people' to volunteer as special constables.<sup>34</sup> Tensions on Tyneside had been heightened by the simultaneous strikes of seamen and

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<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 28 June 1819. See also Elaine Chalus and Fiona Montgomery, 'Women and Politics', in Barker and Chalus, *Women's History*, p. 240.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 29 July 1819, describes the procession of 5,000 female reformists who were accompanied by 30,000 men.

<sup>31</sup> M.L. Bush, 'The Women at Peterloo: The Impact of Female Reform on the Manchester Meeting of 16 August 1819', *History*, 89 (2004), p. 210.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Poole, "'By the Law or the Sword': Peterloo Revisited', *History*, 91 (2006), pp. 254-276.

<sup>33</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 252-3. See for example the report of a gathering in County Durham, where the High Sheriff presided over a meeting that expressed the necessity for a full inquiry into the 'late lamentable' events at Manchester, a subject that called for 'calm, temperate, and impartial investigation', whilst labelling the reformers as 'deluded', 'wicked' and 'illegal'. Speakers went on to discredit newspaper accounts of local reform meetings and 'lament the absence of so many of the country gentlemen on the present occasion, who ... had misunderstood the object of the meeting.' *Durham County Advertiser*, 23 October 1819; *The Times*, 25 October 1819.

<sup>34</sup> See *Tyne Mercury*, 27 July 1819, for an account of an orderly meeting at North Shields that nevertheless resulted in residents being sworn in as special constables.

keelmen, even though the grievances of these strikers were purely trade related.<sup>35</sup> Upwards of 30,000 marched through Newcastle to the town moor, although one report estimated the number at 100,000. Prominent amongst the banners displayed that day by the crowd was a blue silk flag embossed with the figure of Justice and her scales and the words 'Winlaton Reform Society. Presented by the Female Reformers of Winlaton.'<sup>36</sup> Sketches of this meeting depict a number of females in attendance and reports record that many women attended in parties of Female Reformers.<sup>37</sup> Similar meetings were held in Sunderland and Durham, though the numbers that attended were substantially lower. Although North-Eastern women were evident within this movement late in 1819, there is little evidence of the action they took or their motives for doing so. Although the Winlaton Female Reformers crafted a banner, it seems that it was the male reformers who displayed it. The pamphlets and newspapers of 1819 are also quiet on the specific roles these women played.<sup>38</sup> What seems clear though is that the deaths and wounding of the women and girls at Manchester had resulted in a recognition and legitimisation of the right of females nationwide to participate in radical politics.<sup>39</sup> Closely tied to the 1819 demonstrations and involving the active participation of many women were those protests relating to the treatment of Queen Caroline.

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<sup>35</sup> Norman McCord, 'Tyneside Discontents and Peterloo', *Northern History* (1967), pp. 91-111. There was furthermore a fear that pitmen and keelmen were training to arms; see, *A Short Address to those Deluded Persons, Who are Training to Arms, with the Intention of Subverting the Constitution. By A Friendly Observer* (Newcastle, 1819).

<sup>36</sup> *Tyne Mercury* 12 October 1819.

<sup>37</sup> NCL, L.324.4, Political and Election Broadsheets; *Full Account of the General Meeting of the Inhabitants of Newcastle upon Tyne and the Vicinity, Held on the Town Moor, on Monday the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1819* (Newcastle, 1819), p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> See the above, as well as *Address of the Reformers of Fawdon, to their Brothers the Pitmen, Keelmen, and Other Labourers on the Tyne and Wear* (Newcastle, 1819); and, *Reform or Ruin! Take Your Choice. By A Radical Reformer* (Sunderland, 1819).

<sup>39</sup> The events of Peterloo lived long in popular memory as much in fiction as in radical writing; see for example, Mrs G. Linnaeus Banks, *The Manchester Man* (London, 1876).

The death of George III and the accession of his son to the throne brought immediate controversy as Caroline of Brunswick, George IV's exiled wife, returned to England. Divorce proceedings were brought against her by the government in November of 1820 and numerous rumours were encouraged to develop surrounding her time abroad. Volumes of evidence against Caroline were prepared for trial; 'Their *green bag* was a Pandora's box, full of mischief and evil, without even *hope* at the bottom.'<sup>40</sup> The unpopularity of George and the nature of the vicious attacks on her female propriety resulted in a mass movement of support for the Queen and she was greeted with numerous processions and addresses.<sup>41</sup> This episode has rightly been highlighted as an important moment in the development of radical politics in England. What had previously been dominated by the language of the constitution and natural rights was now accompanied by a focus, albeit upon the ruling elite, of the position of women, of their protection within marriage and the sexual double standard. If Peterloo gave women their voice this gave them an issue. However, the support for the radical cause can be overstated. Whilst support for Queen Caroline was undoubtedly strong and radicals quick to pounce and publish on the issue, the groundswell of support was broadly cross-class and retained an emphasis upon old corruption that found support amongst moderate Whigs and Tories. *The Times* complained in reference to a meeting at Morpeth that the terms

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<sup>40</sup> Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Queens* (1821), quoted in Fiona Robertson (ed.), *Women's Writing, 1778-1838. An Anthology* (Oxford, 2001), p. 403.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of events see, Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*; Anna Clark, *Scandal. The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Oxford, 2004); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class. The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 382-87; Dror Wahrman, "'Middle-Class' Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria', *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1993), pp. 396-432; Thomas Lacquer, 'The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV', *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), pp. 417-66; and, Jonathan Fulcher, 'The Loyalist Response to the Queen Caroline Agitations', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), pp. 481-502.

'mob' and 'radical' have been so perseveringly employed by the well-dressed hirelings of the Government offices, in describing all classes of persons who dare to impugn their masters, that what the terms have gained in publicity, they have lost in precision: for example, when we are told that the "Radicals," and "Whig Radicals," and "Mob," &c., of Berkshire, and Hampshire, and Bedfordshire, and Derbyshire, and Cheshire, and Durham, and Northumberland, comprised the main strength of public meetings which have just been held in these great counties; we are so much in the habit of hearing the most illustrious persons in the land made the subjects of the above-mentioned abuse of language, that it surprises no one to find the word "mob" applied to such noblemen as the Earls of CARNARVON and GROSVENOR, or to the most distinguished Peer in the North of England – the Earl GREY.<sup>42</sup>

Local meetings often emphasised the unconstitutional nature of proceedings against Caroline. At a meeting of freeholders in Gateshead Mr Williams, a legal advisor to the Queen, spoke on this matter and continued to highlight the unjust and abnormal nature of proceedings in that 'no criminal whatever in this realm of England is put on his trial without some sort of intimation of the time and the place of the accusation, and, above all, of the character of the accusing witnesses.'<sup>43</sup> At a meeting at the Guild Hall,

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<sup>42</sup> *The Times*, 15 Jan 1821. The *Tyne Mercury*, 25 July 1820, 3 October 1820, makes a similar point. See also the discussion of support for the Queen's cause being represented as 'public opinion', Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p.384.

<sup>43</sup> *The Times*, 14 August 1820.

Newcastle, it was proclaimed that the trial was a 'mockery of Justice' and similar sentiments were expressed at a meeting in Durham, the speakers at which included Earl Grey.<sup>44</sup> There was of course continued reference at such meetings to the unmanly actions of ministers who had voted against the Queen and of their own chivalrous character. Caroline, and those acting on behalf of her, did much to endorse and encourage such language. In an address to supporters at Morpeth, Queen Caroline wrote of the 'enthusiastic loyalty' she had witnessed and that 'if the age of chivalry were ever past, I have lived to see it revived anew.'<sup>45</sup> Whilst women may have felt able to enter the debate surrounding Queen Caroline, as it was an issue that reflected the treatment of all women, they did so within a lexicon of male dominance, of male protection.<sup>46</sup> What must not be neglected though is that on the back of the events of Peterloo huge numbers of working-class women were stirred to take part in political protests whereby they, along with the men they worked alongside, would have been exposed to new political ideas. That these women may have been prompted to involvement through an empathy with the fortunes of another woman, rather than an initial motivation through exposure to political ideas, does not make their experience any less important.

Whilst excluded from most formal meetings in the North East (such as that described above at the Guild Hall) the number of women who sought to play a part in the protest is striking. The 'Females of Newcastle' wrote to the *Black Dwarf* in support for the Queen. It seems likely that these women joined their men-folk at gatherings at which

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<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 29 November, 18 December 1820.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 July 1820.

<sup>46</sup> See Clark, *Scandal*, Chapter Eight.



articles from radical publications such as the *Black Dwarf* were read aloud.<sup>47</sup> Although these women portrayed themselves in typical female roles as 'wives, mothers, and daughters', they also expressed their 'sentiments of respect for the sacred principles of religion, justice, and humanity.'<sup>48</sup> Despite an address from the town and neighbourhood of Newcastle being open only to signatures from men, it was reported that 'one woman brought five of her sons to sign ... and told them, if any one of them refused, she would never again acknowledge him.' Another woman expressed her frustration that she was unable to sign her name 'for it was a woman's cause.'<sup>49</sup> In December 1820, a separate address comprised solely of female signatories was addressed to the Queen, from the females of Newcastle, Gateshead and surrounding area. However, whilst radicals sought to address both the 'Countrymen and Countrywomen' of Northumberland and Durham on the issue of the 'Queen in Danger', it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these women were radicalised by the politics surrounding the event or the particulars of the case.<sup>50</sup> Although there was an initial boost for the movement after her acquittal, the rapid loss of support for the radical cause by the middle of 1821 suggests that for both men and women the injustice of this case was the primary factor.<sup>51</sup> This does not mean, however, that they were unaware of the implications of the case – or the calls for reform which accompanied it – as the issues of morality and corruption were frequently intertwined in public debate and debate was frequent; it was said that in the North East, and the same

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<sup>47</sup> Roger Hawkins (ed.), *The Life of Robert Blakey, 1795-1878: Being his Memoirs First Published in 1879* (Morpeth, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> *Black Dwarf*, 5, 1821, p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> *Tyne Mercury*, 11 June 1820.

<sup>50</sup> Anon., *The Queen in Danger. Addressed to the MEN and WOMEN of Northumberland and Durham* (Newcastle, 1820). Tamara Hunt suggests that the mass support for the Queen should not be considered as political, though here her definition of politics would seem too narrow and does not account for the presence of calls for reform in most criticisms of the measures taken against Caroline; T. Hunt, 'Morality and Monarchy in the Queen Caroline Affair', *Albion*, 23 (1991), pp. 697-722.

<sup>51</sup> See, Fulcher, 'The Loyalist Response'.

holds true for the nation at large, nothing but Queen Caroline was talked of and that her case continued to 'gain ground in public opinion in proportion to the attempts made to degrade her.'<sup>52</sup>

Puzzlingly, Anna Clark identifies the meeting at Morpeth in January 1821, where calls for parliamentary reform were made, as an example of where the tenuous alliance between Whigs and working-class radicals had broken down.<sup>53</sup> Although it was held in defiance of the sheriff's orders, it was not the working class who were prominent in this rebuff of the sheriff's authority. The 'gentlemen who had signed that requisition held landed property in the county to the amount of 200,000*l.* per annum.' Those who spoke at the meeting included Sir John Swinburne, Sir Charles Monck and Earl Grey who argued in favour of parliamentary reform. Grey criticised those who perceived the reforming element to be violent radicals and offered his disapproval of loyal addresses at the current time: 'what circumstances in the present state of the country render them necessary? Are the institutions of the country now threatened with destruction? Are there now any nightly trainings to arms? – any nightly meetings on the Tyne and Wear? Any fabrications of pikes?' The meeting was opened with an expression of hope that they might 'convince the world that the friends of liberty and the defenders of the constitutional rights of the people, were equally the friends of order, loyalty and good government.'<sup>54</sup> Clark identifies the failure of working-class radicals to articulate class difference in their inability to forge a vibrant movement after 1821, but it seems unlikely any such movement would have succeeded in the North East, where working-class men and women joined with members of the middle- and upper-classes in criticism of those

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<sup>52</sup> *Durham Chronicle*, 8 July 1820.

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *Scandal*, p. 205.

<sup>54</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle*, 13 January 1820; *The Times*, 15 January 1820.

members of the aristocracy who had voted for the Bill of Pains and Penalties. Those who had voted for the Bill sought to pass through Newcastle – the major stopping point in the region for any long journeys – with as much secrecy as possible. Despite the servants of the Duke of Northumberland denying any knowledge of him when his carriage stopped in that town, the Duke was found and 'assailed with bitter groans and hisses, and the carriage pelted with mud.'<sup>55</sup> This is in stark contrast to Earl Grey who united the movement against the Bill. He was a symbol of support for the Queen and reform in the region, wildly popular and was greeted with huge crowds upon his arrival at every locality.<sup>56</sup> When passing through Chester-le-Street in 1820 his carriage, as well as that of his wife, was drawn through the streets by a crowd and the following year a newly finished bridge was inscribed with 'Grey's Arch' in celebration of the event.<sup>57</sup> Similar scenes were witnessed in Gateshead, Morpeth and at Alnwick two of his relatives were met with crowds. Despite the overtones of reform, this was a decidedly populist movement in the North East, and to an extent reform remained a separate issue.<sup>58</sup> The news of the withdrawal of the Bill of Pains and Penalties against the Queen brought a series of mass celebrations. Across the region houses and shops were illuminated displaying mottos such as 'Earl Grey for ever' as well as those directly in favour of Queen Caroline, often in defiance of local orders. The celebrations on the coronation of George

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<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 20 November 1820.

<sup>56</sup> Grey's status and actions as chief protagonist in the movement of support for the Queen in the north also led to much criticism. See, Rev. H. Phillpotts, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Earl Grey on Certain Charges Advanced by his Lordship in his Speech at the Late County Meeting in Northumberland, Against the Clergy of the County of Durham* (Durham, 1821).

<sup>57</sup> John Sykes, *Local Records*, vol. ii, p. 130. His popularity had only increased by the time he became Prime Minister, and the acceptance of the cabinet's resignation in May 1832 brought cries from 'thorough-going reformers' for Grey to be reinstated; DCRO, D/Lo/C 142, John Buddle to Lord Londonderry, 12, 14 May 1832.

<sup>58</sup> There were meetings such as that held at Morpeth Townhall in June 1820 where speakers such as Sir John Swinburne spoke specifically in favour of reform; *Tyne Mercury*, 20 June 1820.

IV in the region were marked by a number of popular references to the Queen, the most prominent being a 'procession of women, carrying a small female figure around the streets, having on its head a gilt crown', which 'occasioned a good deal of mirth.'<sup>59</sup> They were also marked by disorder as the thousands of people who had poured into the town from the surrounding country ran amuck, destroying wine and beer pants after consuming their contents.

Whilst the cross-class appeal of the movement in favour of Queen Caroline dampened some of its radical potential, that discontent in the region centred upon Newcastle is significant. Despite Newcastle having returned two members to parliament since medieval times, there was huge support for a cause that frequently expressed the need to remedy corruption in parliament, the necessity of the reform, and the right of the people to uphold and defend their liberties. That these ideas were predominantly expressed by a handful of prominent males in the region should not detract from the fact that although women were rarely given a formal public voice, they were brought into a movement through an appeal to justice that made accessible and understandable the related calls for reform.

### *Women and Political Campaigns After 1830*

Radical politics in the North East was dominated during the early nineteenth century by middle-class reformers, both moderate and radical. The Northern Political Union, mostly comprised and led by middle-class men from throughout the region, such as Charles

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<sup>59</sup> John Sykes, *An Account of the Rejoicings, Illuminations, &c &c, That Have Taken Place in Newcastle and Gateshead* (Newcastle, 1821), p. 41.

Attwood, Thomas Doubleday and John Fife, spoke out on the issue of parliamentary reform and organised the Spital Fields demonstration at Newcastle in 1832.<sup>60</sup> The NPU took advantage of the trade dispute between pitmen and their employers and distributed addresses advertising the meeting amongst the unemployed miners. The meeting was attended by around 40,000 people. Later, protest against the New Poor Law was not greatly evident in this region; the new measures had little impact not only because of the general prosperity in the region during the 1830s but also because boards of guardians remained largely independent – with unions supervised by the same people as before – and often generous in how they conducted their affairs in the treatment of the poor.<sup>61</sup> Working-class agitation associated with radicalism most often coincided in this early period with trade disputes, leading unsurprisingly to a male dominance. In relation to the Chartist movement a few years later what is interesting is that not only was the North

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<sup>60</sup> David Ridley, 'The Spital Field Demonstration and the Parliamentary Reform Crisis in Newcastle', *North East Labour History*, 26 (1992), pp. 4-35. Charles Attwood, brother of Thomas Attwood, owned a class factory at Gateshead and later a soap and alkali factory, establishing in 1845 the Weardale Iron Company. Thomas Doubleday was the son of a manufacturer of soap of sulphuric acid. John Fife was a surgeon at Newcastle and in 1822 founded the Newcastle Eye Infirmary. He was later mayor of Newcastle and was knighted. See further, 'Political Unions', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, December 1833, pp. 685-99.

<sup>61</sup> Norman McCord, 'The Implementation of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act on Tyneside', *International Review of Social History*, 14 (1969), pp. 90-108. This is in contrast to that experienced at Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire; see Michael E. Rose, 'The Anti-Poor Law Movement in the North of England', *Northern History*, 1 (1966), pp. 70-91. However, the findings of McCord are confirmed in a number of subsequent unpublished studies: Pamela Mawson, 'Poor Law Administration in South Shields, 1830-1930' MA thesis (University of Newcastle, 1971); Gloria A. Cadman, 'The Administration of the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834, in the Hexham Poor Law Union', M.Litt thesis (University of Newcastle, 1976); Keith Gregson, 'The Operation of the Poor Laws in the Hartlepool Poor Law Union', M.Litt thesis (University of Newcastle, 1976). On the operation of the Poor Law in the preceding period see, Peter Rushton, 'The Poor Law, the Parish and the Community in North-East England, 1600-1800', *Northern History*, 25 (1989), pp. 135-52. In 1837, Samuel Donkin, in a complaint on the cost of the poor law, reported that he found a number of able-bodied men aged over 65 receiving relief whose families would not allow them to work, because they believed the parish was obliged to provide for them: 'They are too apt to consider such relief as a right, as a privilege, without even enquiring by what means or by whom that relief is furnished; they are satisfied so long as it is obtained.' Samuel Donkin, *Observations upon the Nature of Parochial Relief, and the Principles upon which the Poor-Law Amendment Act is Founded* (Newcastle, 1837).

East at the forefront of the movement but that conditions of employment in the region were generally good at this time.

In 1839 Newcastle was one of three areas being monitored by the Home Office due to suspicions that Chartists were busy collecting arms. By this time associations to promote the Charter had been established for Sunderland and County Durham, whilst the NPU had also been revived.<sup>62</sup> Although there was widespread support for the movement among the working classes, the backbone of the Chartist movement in the North East was the coal miners. As many historians have shown, women played an important role in the Chartist movement, through supporting the actions of their men-folk as well in the formation of Female Associations. There was though some difference in opinion amongst Chartist leaders as to the rightful position of women within the movement. For example, Feargus O'Connor, who established the *Northern Star* and toured the industrial districts of England promoting Chartism, praised the efforts of women in his reply to an address by the Sunderland Female Charter Association, but confirmed his belief that women should play a secondary role within the movement.<sup>63</sup> However, the subordinate rhetoric often expressed by women in published addresses and their self-portrayal as wives and mothers should not be read too literally.<sup>64</sup> Schwarzkopf has rightly critiqued the argument that centres of employment for women were likely to be a centre of female Chartist activity as underestimating the impact the local conditions of industry could have

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<sup>62</sup> William Henry Maehl, 'Chartist Disturbances in North-Eastern England, 1839', *International Review of Social History*, 8 (1963), pp. 389-414.

<sup>63</sup> *Northern Star*, 9 June 1839. See further, David Jones, 'Women and Chartism', *History*, 68 (1983), pp. 1-21.

<sup>64</sup> Michelle De Larrabeiti, 'Conspicuous Before the World: The Political Rhetoric of the Chartist Women', in Eileen Janes Yeo (ed.), *Radical Femininity. Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 106-126. The main source of these addresses is the *Northern Star*.

upon housewives in motivating them to participate.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the evidence of female activity in the North East, where economic conditions were better than elsewhere, serves to push this point further, as women were motivated to protest on issues with no immediate benefit for themselves. That is, they seized upon the political rather than economic aspects of the movement.

The first address to be issued by female Chartists came from Nottingham in December 1838 and was swiftly followed by addresses from women at Birmingham and Newcastle. The address of 'the Female Political Union of Newcastle-upon-Tyne to their Fellow-Countrywomen' is well known to historians, having been reproduced by Dorothy Thompson in her book *The Early Chartists*, but the detail surrounding this address is worth looking at in some depth here. The public meeting at which the Female Political Union of Newcastle was established in December of 1838 was initiated, like those at Birmingham, by male Chartists who dominated proceedings.<sup>66</sup> Here, George Julian Harney, a Chartist orator prominent on the national stage and *L'Ami du Peuple*, called for the women of the district to 'give to your brothers, your husbands, and your sweet-hearts, your powerful hand in their struggle with oppression, Mothers, come and cheer on your sons, in the combat, with tyranny! Sisters, come and cheer on your brothers – wives, come and cheer on your husbands.'<sup>67</sup> Upwards of 1,200 people attended the meeting and they were entertained by the Winlaton band. Men were charged 2d entrance whilst

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<sup>65</sup> Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 79.

<sup>66</sup> At Birmingham Mr T. Clutton Salt was most prominent; see *Northern Star*, 25 August, 1 September 1838.

<sup>67</sup> *Northern Liberator*, 29 December 1838. See further, A.R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge: A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (London, 1958).

women were admitted free in the hope this would ensure a largely female audience.<sup>68</sup> James Ayr spoke of improving the general position of women and that 'it was thought enough to make them domestic slaves, but this state of things should not be allowed to continue.' He assured them that 'if they came forward and took a part in the present movement, future generations would bless them!' Other speakers warned of the danger that press gangs might once again 'sweep their streets, carrying desolation and mourning into their homes.' A resolution was passed that a female union be formed so as to 'bring the energies of the female mind to aid the present movement for happy homes and free altars', and 139 females were enrolled on the spot. The exact number of women in attendance is impossible to ascertain and it is likely that there would have been a significant number of men at the meeting. The figure of 139 would seem a fairly substantial number to have enrolled on the day, but reveals that only a minority of the female working-classes were amongst the most active Chartists.

That the address of the Newcastle Female Political Union was saturated with overtones regarding the domestic duties of women should not be surprising given the meeting that inspired it. These women did present themselves 'first and foremost as wives and mothers preordained to tend their families at home', but in doing so pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable and respectable female behaviour: 'We have been told that the province of woman is her home, and that the field of politics should be left to men; this we deny; the nature of things renders it impossible, and the conduct of those who give the advice is at variance with the principles they assert. Is it not true that the

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<sup>68</sup> The following account is from the *Northern Liberator*, 5 January 1839. Although the Patriotic (male) band of Winlaton was present, a Female Political Union was not formed there until June 1839, *Northern Star*, 22 June 1839.



interests of our fathers, husbands, and brothers, ought to be ours?'<sup>69</sup> Individual rights in this depiction were subsumed within a commitment to further the ends of the family. The address went on to commit to and compel other women to join them in shopping only with those who were sympathetic to their cause, as 'we cannot in justice spend the hard earnings of our husbands with those that are opposed to their rights and interests.'<sup>70</sup> Eileen Yeo has suggested that the Newcastle address be seen as a commitment by women to press for reforms to enable family life to exist.<sup>71</sup> This point needs to be taken further as it underestimates the extent to which these women, like the men of the region, were tutored in a language that expressed national rather than local grievances: 'The strength of Chartism in the North East ought to be located in the expression of solidarity with distressed and dispossessed communities and individuals elsewhere, and their commitment to reforms that would benefit the working classes as a whole.'<sup>72</sup>

At the Newcastle Female Democratic Festival of June 1839 a sentiment was passed in favour of 'The Female Political Union, and may the Daughters of the Tyne, rally round its standard and smile us on to victory.'<sup>73</sup> Harney responded to this sentiment by addressing the issues of the economic conditions of the region: he liked 'to speak the truth, and not flatter; the women of Newcastle did not suffer the miseries of their fellow-women in other parts of England, but that formed no reason why they should not come

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<sup>69</sup> Address of the Female Political Union of Newcastle-upon-Tyne to their Fellow Countrywomen, *Northern Star*, 2 February 1839; Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, p. 92.

<sup>70</sup> This was highlighted by Harney as a way in which females could influence men to become Chartists, whilst Robert Lowery dedicated a pamphlet to the issue of women's role in exclusive dealing; Robert Lowery, *Address to the Fathers and Mothers, Sons and Daughters, of the Working Classes on the System of Exclusive Dealing* (Newcastle, 1839). Similar resolutions were passed in Sunderland and Darlington, *Northern Star*, 13 July 1839.

<sup>71</sup> Eileen Yeo, 'Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in Labour Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *North East Labour History*, 28 (1995), p. 10.

<sup>72</sup> This point is made in connection with male chartists but holds true also for the females in the region. Joan Hugman, "'A Small Drop of Ink': Tyneside Chartism and the *Northern Liberator*", in Owen Ashton, Robert Dyson and Stephen Roberts (eds.), *The Chartist Legacy* (Suffolk, 1999), p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> The following account is from the *Northern Liberator*, 8 June 1839.

forward and assist to relieve those who were sinking into the premature grave of famine.' It was exactly such assistance these female Chartists had offered in their address which expressed national concerns rather than local grievances. Many female members were from colliery districts where male earnings were generally good and sufficient to support a family. The report by Sir John Walsham on the General Condition of the Working Classes in Northumberland and Durham in 1837 found there to be high wages, relatively cheap food, and plenty of work, the region escaping the recent 'derangement of monetary affairs'.<sup>74</sup> O'Connor was forced to recognise at a speech in Sunderland that working men in the area enjoyed prosperous positions.<sup>75</sup> Mr Welsh, an orator from South Shields, spoke at Newcastle later in the year stating that the 'Chartist feeling was one of principle; and not one of poverty; that it was their determination to have just government and their political rights .... Their wages were at the highest, both labourers and Mechanics'.<sup>76</sup> As discussed, the Poor Law was not a source of grievance in the region whilst the Factory Acts were not relevant to the majority of men or women there.<sup>77</sup> Consequently Harney was said to have drawn a 'vivid picture of the horrors of the factory laws and New Poor Law' elsewhere and denounced them as 'degenerating Englishmen, and corrupting Englishwomen. It was to get rid of such enormities as these that he desired the People's Charter; let that Charter become law, and those curses would disappear from the land. (Loud Cheers.)' Although the Female Political Union had locked into a series of rhetorical conventions that were intimated to them by male Chartists and the preceding

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<sup>74</sup> NA, HO 73/53/82, 'Report on General Condition of the Working Classes, Northumberland and Durham, 1837'.

<sup>75</sup> *Sunderland Herald*, 28 June 1839.

<sup>76</sup> *Northern Star*, 7 December 1839.

<sup>77</sup> Mr Doubleday admitted of the New Poor Law that they knew 'nothing of it experimentally in Newcastle or in the North'; *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838.

addresses from female Chartists at Birmingham, they utilised a language of responsibility, that stemmed from their domestic position. Their responsibility was not only for their family and their community, but for the men and women of the country. The Female Charter Association of Sunderland expressed similar sentiments when Mrs Sanderson proposed and passed a resolution that 'this meeting, believes that its interest is bound up with the rest of society ... [and that it is their] imperative duty to help the suffering people ... [and attain] their rights from the oppressors of the poor.'<sup>78</sup>

At a mixed meeting, dinner and soiree in December 1840, to celebrate the recent release of prominent Chartists, a long address was read out by Mr Anderson on behalf of the Female Association of Newcastle. In it they reiterated their right to engage in Chartist activities: 'It has been very generally held out, that females have no right to meddle in this or any other public affairs, but we at once tell those persons who hold these opinions, that we know of no good authority they can have for maintaining such a doctrine.'<sup>79</sup> They went on to express their

sorrow and regret, at the awful state which our unhappy country is in at the present time, when poverty, wretchedness, and misery ... [prevails] from one end of the land to the other .... in what state are the homes of the thousands of females who are dragging out their miserable existence in the cotton factory hells, and other such manufactories, many of them equally as bad?... These considerations, we think, form sufficient inducements for us to

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<sup>78</sup> *Northern Liberator*, 1 June 1839.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 December 1840.

come forward, on every opportunity, to give our humble assistance to the cause.

Whilst the economic explanation regarding the participation of men has been overturned in favour of socio-cultural explanations, the influence of national issues, rather than discontent arising from their domestic situation or employment, has not been made explicit enough in the discussion of female Chartists.<sup>80</sup>

The North East has gained a reputation amongst historians for extremism during the Chartist era, helped in no small degree by an aggressive regional leadership who used the locally published *Northern Liberator* to voice thoughts that were often delivered with a barely disguised threat of violence.<sup>81</sup> There was undoubtedly a fear amongst concerned observers that an outbreak of serious violence might occur within the region at the time. During the tensions of 1839 there was a series of nightly meetings at the Forth, a recreation ground near the centre of town. With news of the commencement of the first meeting a message was passed amongst the inhabitants of the boxes at the Theatre Royal, stating falsely that the military were out. This was said to cause 'some sensation among the ladies' and fear that the 'row was increasing' led one man to collect his wife and daughter from the theatre and to recommend to others that they 'get the ladies out as fast as possible'.<sup>82</sup> A meeting at the Forth during 1842 caused enough alarm for the mayor to be informed of proceedings by letter at least four times during a period of an hour and a

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<sup>80</sup> See, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), Chapter Three; James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1994); and, Paul A. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (Basingstoke, 1995).

<sup>81</sup> See William Henry Maehl, 'The Dynamics of Violence in Chartism: A Case Study in North-eastern England', *Albion*, 7 (1975), pp. 101-119; Maehl, 'Chartist Disturbances'.

<sup>82</sup> NCL, L. 329.22, Mr. G.C. Atkinson's Report of Chartist Meetings Held in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1839, p. 5.

half.<sup>83</sup> The threat of violence can, however, be overstated. There were no outbreaks of considerable violence with the use of arms, despite the threats and the Chartists remained on the whole a well-behaved, if occasionally rowdy, mob. Their activities did not exclude women. Besides the numerous tea parties that were held throughout the region, an environment that played host to male and female speakers and interaction on political points, females were also present at the moonlight meetings and more informal gatherings and often voted on resolutions.<sup>84</sup> Thomas Devyr, the acting editor of the *Northern Liberator*, was to later criticise the crowds at Newcastle that were waiting for news of the Frost uprising in Wales during 1839:

While in the upper large room were assembled the earnest and gloomy chiefs of the insurrection, in the lower rooms were numbers of unthinking, good natured men, singing and playing music, even with their wives and daughters among them, waiting for the signal. Those people! Is it there they ought to be? Or is it in their peaceable homes and quiet beds, reposing from the toils of the day, and recruiting their faculties for that toil which the morrow was sure to bring to them? But here they were, peaceful, Christian men and women, willing to labour honestly and well for the sustainment of their families.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> TWAS, ACC 13/13/36-38, Letters from John Stephens, Westgate Police Station Newcastle, to Mayor Hodgson, 23 August 1842.

<sup>84</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838, 5 October 1839; *Northern Liberator*, 5 January 1839; *Tyne Mercury*, 21 January 1840.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Aignes Devyr, *The Odd Book of the Nineteenth Century, or 'Chivalry' in Modern Days, A Personal Record of Reform – Chiefly Land Reform, for the Last Fifty Years* (New York, 1882), p. 195.

Even at moments of threatened violence women fully partook in the culture of Chartism. Edward Hamer vividly described the prominent role women played in the Newport march and their determined efforts in the attack on the Westgate Hotel where several arrested Chartists were being held – one woman vowing to fight until she was knee deep in blood.<sup>86</sup> Not only did women stand alongside the men in their community but they also stood in for them. At a meeting in County Durham called for a time – unbeknown to the organiser – that was too early for the local men to attend from work, 'every part of the large room, window seats and all, was occupied by the canny women of this place.' To ensure that the speaker continued with the meeting the door was locked and it was declared that 'he should not leave till he had formed a female association.'<sup>87</sup> Chartism in its associations, lectures, meetings was a social experience in which women were included and had as much to do with leisure as it did with labour.

The Chartist movement of the 1840s was a more moderate affair in the North East than it had been during the late 1830s. Whilst the agitation in 1848 caused great concern elsewhere there was little apprehension of events in the region, the movement having lost some of its fierce oratory and physical threat in its transition into a organisation more closely aligned with middle-class interests. Despite such changes there was a continuance of female activity through this period, although records of these are less extant than for the preceding period. Reports of female attendance at radical meetings continued through the 1840s and 1850s, and they were prominent in fund raising. When Feargus O'Connor drew Miss Vaughan of Sunderland as the first name in the ballot for the four-acre class of his ill-fated Land Plan, he commented that she was responsible for

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<sup>86</sup> Edward Hamer, *A Brief Account of the Chartist Outbreak at Llanidloes in the Year 1839* (Llanidloes, 1867).

<sup>87</sup> *Northern Star*, 30 March 1839.

having given more money to Chartism 'than any individual of her class in England.'<sup>88</sup> At South Durham women played a prominent role in the movement into the 1850s, one woman advertising the discussion classes she held in her home on Sunday evenings.<sup>89</sup>

Many male Chartists adopted a rhetoric that represented their motivation in following the movement as one of protecting their female relatives and women in general. Slogans such as 'for children and wife we'll war to the knife!' were common and the men were frequently called to stand firm and be prepared to take action for the sake of their wives. Such calls for action were often accompanied with suggestions that women should follow their male brethren, even in acts of violence. The 'Great meeting of Northumberland and Durham' on New Years Day 1838, was attended by around 10,000 people and they heard the Rev. Joseph Stephens urge them that 'if the musket and the pistol, the sword and the pike were of no avail, let the women take the scissors, the child the pin or needle.'<sup>90</sup> Women in the North East, as elsewhere, were deeply involved in the Chartist movement. What stands out as important is the manner in which these women were encouraged to participate not on the grounds of their present situation, which was generally good, but so as to benefit men and women nationally. Like their men-folk they were inculcated at local meetings in a language of predominantly national, rather than local, grievances. At one meeting it was argued that the 'people of the South were losing their little articles of furniture piece by piece, and were rapidly sinking into a state of destitution, starvation, and misery. (Hear.) If they did not press forward for the

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Jones, 'Women and Chartism', p. 17.

<sup>89</sup> *Peoples Paper*, 10 September 1853. See also Keith Flett, 'But the Chartist Principles Did not Die', *North East Labour History*, 22 (1988), pp. 20-26.

<sup>90</sup> *Northern Star*, 6 January 1838. Rev. Stephens had served briefly in ministry at Newcastle before being appointed to the Ashton under Lyne circuit in 1832. See Eileen Groth Lyon, 'Stephens, Joseph Rayner (1805-1879)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26389>, accessed 10 May 2006].

attainment of their political rights, this country would in a few short years be reduced to a state which would equal the present state of the poor in Ireland.<sup>91</sup> Although the language adopted by Chartist women did not seek to break from representations of the dominant gender roles and expectations of the period there seems to have been little impetus to do so. As the men of the region stood in a 'mutual league of amity and concord'<sup>92</sup> with those suffering under the present system, so too did the women pledge to work alongside them, not for their immediate benefit but for the benefit of working men and women across the country.

The moral rehabilitation of the state under Peel's politically-charged economic reforms – the taxing of incomes amongst the upper middle-class in 1842, the Bank Charter Act of 1844, and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 – seems to have done much to quash the Chartists 'totalizing critique' that the State was irredeemably corrupt. Boyd Hilton has argued that as Chartists generally accepted basic social norms it took only 'a slight shift in political and economic conditions for subversive instincts to elide into apparent submission and accommodation.'<sup>93</sup> In the case of the North East it seems that changing economic conditions were less important than the failure of Chartist political rhetoric to come to terms with the moral tone of legislation during the 1840s.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps the most important act in this context is the 1842 Mines Act, which banned women and children under the age of ten from working underground. Although, as discussed previously, no women worked underground in the region, this measure seemed to signal

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<sup>91</sup> Newcastle meeting, reported in *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838.

<sup>92</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838.

<sup>93</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous?*, p. 621. See also, T.R. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976); and, Jones, *Languages of Class*.

<sup>94</sup> It is also the case, as Church argues, that unions were active in discouraging their members from political activities, but this was evident prior to 1840 and fails to explain the sudden drop in Chartist activities; Roy Anthony Church, 'Chartism and the Miners: A Reinterpretation', *Labour History Review*, 56 (1991), pp. 23-36.



the willingness of the State to intervene so as to improve the condition of the working-classes. Anna Clark has discussed the contradiction between the Chartist's need to mobilize female workers and the (male) demand for the vote to protect women from the degradation of work; but there was no such contradiction in the North East. Women were mobilized in the North East through an appeal based upon previous hardships not current ones and an empathy with the conditions of working-class women elsewhere. The decline of Chartism in this region cannot be attributed to the role of domesticity as Clark suggests, but reaffirms Stedman Jones' argument as to the role of state legislation. Saville's contention, that this theory is undermined by the failure of such reforms to impact considerably upon working-class lives for a number of decades, needs to be treated with some caution.<sup>95</sup> Economic conditions varied considerably across the country and the importance of the perception of change and actual change should not be underestimated.

The North East was prominent in other reforming activities in this period. The anti-slavery campaign was popular and the region holds an importance in relation to a number of foremost female organisers and their supporters, in the period from the end of the 1830s to the mid 1850s. The references to colonial slavery by Chartists in this period needs to be seen in this context. This was not just a rhetorical flourish designed to draw parallels between slavery at home and abroad but a device by which it must have been hoped that some of the moral and respectable popular support for that movement would reflect on themselves. Whilst the National Petition was signed by one in every eighteen persons in the region, a respectable number in national context,<sup>96</sup> an anti-slavery petition

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<sup>95</sup> John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>96</sup> Maehl, 'The Dynamics of Violence in Chartism', p. 104.

from the females of Newcastle and Gateshead, presented to Parliament in May of 1833, was signed by almost 6,000 women, or between a quarter and one third of the total female adult population in those towns.<sup>97</sup> The extent of direct support for the anti-slavery movement amongst working-class women is difficult to establish. Accounts of meetings often name the middle-class organisers and speakers and perhaps allude to the sprinkling of ladies present amongst those in a gallery or other prominent area. Rarely are they explicit in detailing the crowd at large, though at local venues described as full that were capable of holding hundreds and occasionally over a thousand at capacity it must be assumed that women of the working classes attended in reasonable numbers.

The first recorded account of anti-slavery activity in the North East is from late in 1791, an abolition society whose members were all male and predominantly Quakers.<sup>98</sup> It was reported that a number of women at Newcastle refrained from purchasing sugar and other items as part of a campaign of abstention and subscription lists from the early nineteenth century contain a number of donations from females. Despite a male Anti-Slavery Association being formed in 1823 at Newcastle there is no evidence of a separate Ladies organisation until 1831 and that at Darlington was formed only in 1836 followed shortly after by one at South Shields, although an association at Durham was in existence

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<sup>97</sup> Clare Midgley, 'Women Anti-Slavery Campaigners, with Special Reference to the North East', *North East Labour History*, 29 (1995), p. 21. A cutting in TWAS, DX 17/1, 'Scrapbook', puts the number of signatories at 6,288, though Midgley puts the figure at 5,986.

<sup>98</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 24 September 1791. The following is based upon Midgley, 'Women Anti-Slavery Campaigners'; Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London, 1992); L. Billington and R. Billington, "'A Burning Zeal for Righteousness": Women in the British Anti-Slavery Movement, 1820-1860', in Jane Rendall, (ed.), *Equal or Different. Women's Politics 1800-1914*, (Oxford, 1987); E. Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (London, 1970); E. O'Donnell, 'Woman's Rights and Duties: Quaker Women in the Nineteenth Century', Ph.D. thesis (University of Sunderland, 1999); and, Mood, 'Women in the Quaker Community'.

before then.<sup>99</sup> Prominent amongst the ladies movement in the region were Quaker families. Elizabeth Pease, daughter of Joseph Pease, MP and owner of Pease mills, was secretary of the Ladies' Anti-Slavery society in Darlington. She compiled information on slavery, authored articles and leaflets on the subject, and was in contact with abolitionists from America. In Newcastle the Quaker Anna Richardson and her husband Henry were prominent in the anti-slavery movement. However, his involvement in campaigning against slavery pales in comparison to Anna's effective supervision of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, whilst she was also responsible for the production of the *Monthly Illustrations of American Slavery*. She went on to form the Newcastle Ladies' Free Produce Association in 1846 and promoted this cause through the *British Friend*. Members of the Richardson family and other female Quakers also raised funds to purchase the freedom of two slaves, whilst others sheltered 'Negro slaves who had taken refuge in this country.'<sup>100</sup> The activities of these prominent women in the movement and the independent role they created for themselves has led some historians, such as Clare Midgley, to describe them as 'proto-feminists'. Whilst this may be true (although the usefulness of such categorisation is debateable) the label would seem applicable only to the small number of women who were active in such activities. Even those activities which can misleadingly and belittlingly be termed small-scale, such as the distribution of leaflets or the encouragement of local women to boycott products, were only done in any organised fashion by a minority of women. What the campaign does show though is that

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<sup>99</sup> *Durham County Advertiser*, 3 May 1823; TWAS, D/XD 5/263, Circular of Darlington Ladies Society for the Abolition of Slavery. The 'Ladies of Durham' formed an association in January 1831 and at their first meeting forwarded the sum of £11 14s. they had collected in the city to the Anti-Slavery Society in London. *Durham County Advertiser*, 14 January 1831.

<sup>100</sup> W. Robinson, 'Recollections of Newcastle Meeting Sixty Years Ago' in J. Steel (ed.), *A Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends*, p. 61.

these women were able, in working alongside fellow male supporters, to create their own space in which they could express their sympathy with a movement that did not seek to benefit themselves. The highpoint of regional activity during the late 1830s, followed by a spell of relative inactivity during the 1840s and early 1850s, coincided to a large degree with the pattern of Chartism in the region. There is perhaps something to be said for a connection between the two movements and success in the moral rehabilitation of the state in dampening the success of both.<sup>101</sup>

In many ways one can come to a similar conclusion as to the participation of North-Eastern women in the Anti-Corn Law cause as those opposed to slavery. The Anti-Corn Law movement, revived initially at Manchester and the surrounding cotton districts of Lancashire in 1839, could appeal on a number of levels. In calling for the abolition of those laws that interfered with the 'food of the people' the Anti-Corn Law League promoted itself as a movement with a philanthropic concern for the poor, that was extended, through support for international peace and a commitment to the end to slavery, to encompass the good of all. In circumventing the criticism that the movement was one essentially of economic concerns the campaign raised its standing by arguing higher moral justifications and although Chartism is often considered in opposition to the Anti-Corn Law League there was some cooperation between the two movements, such as at Darlington.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Jones, *Languages of Class*.

<sup>102</sup> In contrast to the mutual meetings that were witnessed at Darlington, where both movements had a distinct middle-class following, at Newcastle Anti-Corn Law meetings were cancelled when Chartists attempted to share their stage. For examples of alliances formed at local levels nationally see, Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrell, *The People's Bread. A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000), p. 140.

Over three hundred Anti-Corn Law associations were formed nationwide between 1838 and 1844. In the North East there were associations formed at Barnard Castle, Darlington, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, South Shields, Stockton, Sunderland and Tynemouth.<sup>103</sup> The headquarters of the League's Northern District, encompassing Northumberland, Cumberland, Durham and Westmorland, had its offices at Newcastle and the agent there, Daniel Liddell, was an enthusiastic and dedicated organizer.<sup>104</sup> The League appealed to women directly as consumers and purchasers. Although this ensured a focus upon the domestic experiences of women as wives, mothers and daughters, it also enabled them to take part in the activities of the League.<sup>105</sup> Nationwide women, predominantly of the middle classes, campaigned against the Corn Laws through methods such as door-to-door canvassing and helped to raise funds by hosting charity bazaars. Such 'fair agitators' were criticized for having laid aside the 'proprieties of their sex and sphere', although *The Times* sought to blame more fully the men who encouraged them to raise funds and become 'petticoat politicians': 'Nothing can be more heartless on the part of the Leaguers than that they should have sought to escape from their embarrassments by subjecting to a sort of political prostitution those confiding creatures whose virtuous seclusion they are bound upon every manly principle to maintain inviolate.'<sup>106</sup>

The politicisation of domestic economy that brought women into the movement was dominated by the language of caring and philanthropy. This has been recognised but perhaps underappreciated by historians of the movement. Patrick Joyce has approached the claims made by leaders of the League that the movement was essentially a

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 253-260.

<sup>104</sup> Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846* (London, 1958), pp. 179-80.

<sup>105</sup> See Simon Morgan, 'Domestic Economy and Political Agitation: Women and the Anti-Corn Law League, 1839-46', in Gleadle and Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics*, pp. 115-33.

<sup>106</sup> *The Times*, 1 January 1842.

humanitarian one with some scepticism.<sup>107</sup> That there was certainly a good degree of self-interest in the actions of these men, it does not follow that others were not motivated to take part in, or support the activities of, the league through this rhetoric. Simon Morgan has recently discussed the radical significance of the League for women in its connection between household economy and economic policy. Morgan describes the coexistence in the material aimed at women of economic arguments and appeals to their charitable natures. These 'radical discourses' were rooted in the domestic roles of women, though, Morgan argues, had 'striking implications ... regarding the areas of public policy which could legitimately be defined as "women's questions"'.<sup>108</sup> However, it is hard to see these abstract economic justifications as a primary motivating factor for most women. Where such economic issues were broached in a context intended specifically for females it was primarily related to and understood through the price of goods, as it was for most men, rather than through technical questions of political economy. For example, when Cobden spoke at an audience at Newcastle he addressed the many ladies that were in the audience: 'Now, ladies, when you sit down to your tea or coffee, there is a mysterious, unseen, unknown neighbour sitting beside you, and for every lump you take out of the sugar basin he takes one too. You don't see him, or know him – if you did you would not allow him; but if you could see him and ask what he meant, he'd say he was doing it for your protection. (Laughter and applause.)'<sup>109</sup>

Morgan uses the example of an address to the Ladies of Sunderland from the Sunderland Anti-Corn Law League, who were asked to support their cause not only

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<sup>107</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 128-30.

<sup>108</sup> Morgan, 'Women and the Anti-Corn Law League', p. 122-23.

<sup>109</sup> *News for the Millions*, 5 February 1844.

because of their responsibilities to the poor, but to uphold the interests of the shipping industry, intertwined as it was with the fortunes of so many men in the area. He cites this as an example of the fear created around the breakdown of family and loss of respectability that would arrive on the doorsteps of these middle-class women if their men were to suffer economic hardship. Morgan also suggests that this address should be seen as implicitly advocating the right of women to agitate for the best interests of their families. Leaving aside that such arguments were made explicit in only a minority of cases, many women of the middle classes would have had first hand knowledge and experience of family business at this time, either in support of their husband or father.<sup>110</sup> Disinterest in such enterprises, especially in the shipping town of Sunderland, would have been unusual, as would working-class women being unwilling to agitate for their family interests. Although Morgan is arguing that Anti-Corn Law agitation allowed women to push the boundaries of what they deemed acceptable action to take in support of their families it is difficult to argue, apart from the actions of a small number of prominent women such as Mrs Cobden or Mrs Massie, that there was much difference between the activities of these women and those involved in the campaigns against slavery.

The League did, however, help sustain in the region an interest, among both males and females, in an active participation towards the alleviation of distress that was mostly experienced beyond the locality. The stress upon a responsibility to the poor in the address from the Sunderland committee was undoubtedly a strong motivating factor for those men and women of Sunderland who took part in the movement. In the 1845 by-election at Sunderland the free trade candidate polled almost 45% of the vote in a two-way contest with George Hudson, 'Railway King', who was seen to offer railways and

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<sup>110</sup> See Mood, 'Women in the Quaker Community'.

new docks, suggesting that there was clearly some division locally over which candidate would secure the best interests of the community.<sup>111</sup> At Newcastle much was made of the argument that the corn laws exacerbated and caused destitution amongst the poor. A petition from Newcastle called for an end to the corn laws as 'the Working Classes of this Nation, notwithstanding their enterprise and ingenuity, their industrious habits and peaceable conduct, are enduring an unparalleled amount of suffering, and unable to procure a sufficiency of food for themselves and their children.'<sup>112</sup> Little was made of specifically middle-class interests.

Evidence surrounding the exact involvement of females in the region is scarce beyond references to the ladies assembled at public meetings.<sup>113</sup> The Anti-Corn Law paper printed in Newcastle, *The Anti-Monopolist*, was composed mostly of articles from other publications and contains little relevant information to role of women in the region. Whilst geographically isolated from the centres of Anti-Corn Law agitation at Manchester and London a significant number of women seem to have participated in the movement from the region, although the most prominent female activists were, as in the movement against slavery, Quakers. Miss Priestman, from a well known Quaker family in Newcastle, was an honorary secretary to the Ladies Committee of the National Anti-Corn Law Bazaar at Covent Garden in 1845. Furthermore, over thirty women from the region were on the Ladies' Committee.<sup>114</sup> Although this formed only a small percentage

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<sup>111</sup> Michael J. Turner, 'Reform Politics and the Sunderland By-Election of 1845', *Northern History*, 38 (2001), pp. 83-106. A single meeting at Sunderland raised £170, *Sunderland Herald*, 16 January 1846.

<sup>112</sup> NCL, 'Collections Relating to the History of Newcastle on Tyne', vol. x, 1842 to 1845, petition dated 2 May 1843. There was clear support for the movement from the working-classes, pottery workers at North Hylton contributing funds; *Northern Star*, 30 September 1843.

<sup>113</sup> See for example *Newcastle Courant*, 2 August 1844, where the audience at a meeting at Newcastle was described as having the 'front seats well filled with ladies.'

<sup>114</sup> NCL, L. 042, 'National Anti-Corn Law Bazaar, To Be Held in the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, May, 1845'.



nationally of those women on the Ladies' Committee, it would seem a fine showing for an area remote from Lancashire and London where the huge majority of those on the committee resided. Two corn law rhymes, written by women to promote an Anti-Corn Law Bazaar at Newcastle early in 1842, suggest though the extent to which those women who took part might identify with those aspects of the movement relating to the oppression and poverty of the poor.<sup>115</sup>

In the Chartist, Anti-Slavery and Anti-Corn Law movements the pattern of involvement in the region is different from the national picture. Whilst these movements, in varying degrees, centred upon economic discontentment, they nevertheless found favour in the North East which was passing through a period of general prosperity. Nevertheless, men and women joined these movements and were active participants. Women were able to campaign and protest on issues that may have been represented as stemming from their domestic concerns but that did not stem from their direct experience at this time. There could, of course, have been the fear that hard times may be only just round the corner and this may well have been a motivating factor. Although it is difficult to disentangle the reasons why these women came forward in support of these movements, the predominant motivation expressed by those involved would seem to stem from a sense of injustice being perpetrated with its most visible consequences evident outside the region.

The collapse of popular Chartism in 1848 saw little further reform agitation in the ensuing decades; it was not replaced by an effective or wide-spread national reform

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<sup>115</sup> See Appendix. The likely authors of the rhymes are Margaret Priestman and Jane Richardson, two women from prominent Quaker families. The anti-monopolist messages in the rhymes might best be seen as primarily influenced by Quaker theology than any class feeling.

movement.<sup>116</sup> Studies of the transition from 'conflict to consensus' during the mid-decades of this period suggested initially that higher wages dampened radical attitudes, whilst the politically active working classes were seduced by notions of respectability. It is clear from subsequent research that wage improvements on a national level were patchy at best.<sup>117</sup> As we saw in the discussion of Chartism, it is not the case that political involvement was necessarily dictated by immediate economic concerns. On the issue of respectability historians have recently posited the appropriation of this discourse, by co-operative movements, friendly societies, trade unions and educational movements, as an attempt to redefine independence from the middle-classes, rather than an acceptance of a middle-class 'ideology'.<sup>118</sup> The continuation of working-class radicalism after Chartism has also been emphasised by a number of historians, but it remains difficult to accommodate the radicalism of the 1830s within a story culminating in the small socialist movement witnessed during the late-Victorian period; nor is it clear that this should be attempted.<sup>119</sup> The place of organised labour has remained central to discussions of this era; echoes of the Webbs' work can still be heard and this mid-Victorian period is often seen as a turning point in the trade union movement.<sup>120</sup> Yet, organized labour – whose wider politicisation is debatable – were only ever a portion of the working class during mid-century and cannot be taken as a substitute for the working class as a whole.

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<sup>116</sup> Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, p. 237.

<sup>117</sup> Roy Anthony Church, *The Great Victorian Boom, 1850-1873* (London, 1975); Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working-Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1985).

<sup>118</sup> See Simon Cordery, 'Friendly Societies and the Discourse of Respectability in Britain, 1825-1875', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), pp. 35-58.

<sup>119</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), pp. 163-86. See also, Anthony Taylor, "'A Melancholy Odyssey Among London Public Houses': Radical Club Life and the Unrespectable in Mid-Nineteenth Century London", *Historical Research*, 78 (2005), pp. 74-95; and, Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organized Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991)

<sup>120</sup> Sidney James Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894; London, 1911); Sidney James Webb, *The Story of the Durham Miners, 1662-1921* (London, 1921).

Politics in the South Durham during this period was essentially under the influence of iron, steel and local industry; Darlington, a Quaker 'company town', was a secure stronghold of influence for the 'industrial elite'.<sup>121</sup> In 1832, Joseph Pease was elected MP for South Durham and was succeeded by a number of relatives. Chartism in Darlington was predominantly middle-class, as were the other political movements before mid-century, and, as at Northumberland, middle-class radicals in the region were prominent in the support of European exiles during the late 1840s and 1850s, a Polish Hungarian Relief Committee being formed at Newcastle during the first half of 1852.<sup>122</sup> Radicalism remained strong amongst the middle-class, or 'shopocracy', of Newcastle during the 1850s and 1860s, especially during the American Civil War.<sup>123</sup> Whilst political activities became dominated by a small clan of middle-class men, on the coalfields of Durham and Northumberland attempts at unionisation led to the creation in 1842 of the Miners' Association. Although founded in Wakefield, the stronghold and main financier of the Association was in the North East, two-thirds of the 30,000 strong membership in 1843 came from the region, rising later to 100,000. The Association encouraged its members to refrain from political activities, its sole aim being to 'unite all Miners to equalise and diminish the hours of labour and to obtain the highest possible amount of wages for the labour of the Miner'.<sup>124</sup> Unions from the northern coalfield did however support the political activities of a small number of former Chartists who founded the Northern Reform Union.

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<sup>121</sup> T.J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North East, 1832-74* (Brighton, 1975), p. 129.

<sup>122</sup> See the numerous reports in local newspapers and TWAS, mf, 'Cowen Collection'.

<sup>123</sup> Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms*, pp. 144-61.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in, A.J. Taylor, 'The Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, 1842-48: A Study in the Problem of Integration', *Economica*, 22 (1955), p. 4

The Northern Reform Union was established by 'friends of political reform' in 1858 with the object of seeing parliament pass measures based upon 'Manhood Suffrage, Vote by Ballot and No Property Qualifications for MPs.'<sup>125</sup> This was effectively led by Joseph Cowen, a wealthy middle-class radical who claimed to champion the cause of the working-classes.<sup>126</sup> Hugman has argued that Tyneside Radicalism was uniquely able to retain its prominence in local politics because of its 'deep-rooted internationalism.'<sup>127</sup> It is difficult to square this with the relatively small number of popular meetings that focused upon this issue during the 1850s, the 'significant debts' that occurred as the costs of resettling refugees was not met by sufficient donations, and the collapse of the NRU when its attentions were turned to raising funds for Garibaldi.<sup>128</sup> The NRU and the subsequent Northern Reform League dominated regional politics, but they were the product of Cowen's efforts and interests, who through articles in – and later ownership of – the *Newcastle Chronicle* was able to articulate and disseminate his political views. His working-class audience was not always receptive to his message, despite the working-class dominance of NRU membership. It seems that a large proportion of working-class support was brought into the movement through Cowen's connections with the leaders of trade associations, Mechanics' Institutes, Co-operative Societies, who were often also

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<sup>125</sup> Colin Muris, 'The Northern Reform Union, 1858-1862', MA thesis (University of Durham, 1953), p. 5; Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism. Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 197.

<sup>126</sup> See, Muris, 'The Northern Reform Union'; Joan Hugman, 'Joseph Cowen of Newcastle and Radical Liberalism', Ph.D. thesis (University of Northumbria, 1993); Nigel Todd, *The Militant Democracy: Joseph Cowen and Victorian Radicalism* (Whitley Bay, 1991); and, Evan Rowland Jones, *The Life and Speeches of Joseph Cowen, MP* (London, 1886).

<sup>127</sup> Hugman, 'Joseph Cowen', p. 35.

<sup>128</sup> John Belchem, 'Britishness, Asylum-Seekers and the Northern Working Class: 1851', *Northern History*, 39 (2002), p. 72. Cowen had become interested in European radical politics during his time at the University of Edinburgh and became a acquaintance of Mazzini. Cowen became a leading figure in the Friends of Italy Society, although the organisation relied heavily upon the organisational work of Caroline Stansfeld and her sister Emilie Hakes; see Kathryn Gleadle, 'Stansfeld, Caroline (1816-1885)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/56461>, accessed 29 May 2006]

councillors on the NRU.<sup>129</sup> Superficially, it would seem that the NRU enjoyed large support amongst the working-class and could claim a dedicated branch leadership. However, the NRU was not able to sustain itself despite this apparent support and as Cowen's efforts and money became increasingly taken up with the events surrounding Garibaldi most branches died out. The wider members of these organisations were essentially self-interested, in wages and their conditions of work and leisure, and it must be remembered that as a social group only a minority of miners at this time were articulate in wider politics. Much of this was down to the burden and hours of work, men such as Charles Fenwick only being allowed the time to educate themselves if they were able to join the 'elite band of hewers' whose hours were less strenuous.<sup>130</sup> Worse still for Cowen's claims to represent the interests of the working classes, attempts to connect with members of the working-class beyond pit villages were a failure. Robert Woods handed out free newspapers and handbills across the working-class districts Newcastle and Gateshead, distributing extensively through shops and factories, but he found little support. At one house he presented the woman who answered the door with a newspaper and was surprised to find that she offered him 2d; 'it appeared a man called at her home with one of the London papers every week and she took me for him'. The appeal of the NRU was limited, not only because of Cowen's refusal to submit an electoral candidate that could be embraced by middle-class radicals – P.A. Taylor, who ran unsuccessfully in 1859, alienated dissenters, leading Cowen to bemoan the 'shop-keeping class' – but because of the Union's stance that mimicked the language of Chartism but returned in

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<sup>129</sup> This and the following passage is based largely upon Muris, 'The Northern Reform Union'.

<sup>130</sup> See Norman McCord, 'Fenwick, Charles (1850-1918)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47351>, accessed 31 May 2006]. On the high levels of illiteracy amongst miners and their families see, William Brewer Stephens, 'Illiteracy in the North-East Coalfield, c. 1830-1870', *Northern History*, 37 (2000), pp. 215-37.

speeches and handbills time and again to the point that any partial concession to their demands should be seized-upon and accepted.

Politics in the North East between the 1850s and 1870s was undoubtedly calmer than in the preceding decades and although there was a continuation of radicalism in the region, the politics was also different. Focus upon complex foreign issues with limited popular appeal and demands for full or partial suffrage dependant on how generously parliamentarians would approach the issue, lacked the clarity and absoluteness of Chartism, anti-slavery and free trade. Whilst middle-class radicals professed refugees as genuine political exiles worthy of support, others in the press presented them as 'mercenaries, mendicants, and malingerers', who were part of a 'red republican' plot.<sup>131</sup> There is little evidence of female involvement during this period, but it is debatable how much genuine interest was shown by working-class men. This does not mean that there was no working-class interest in political activities or protest, rather there was no longer the space – beyond union representation – in which their concerns could be adequately articulated. Female involvement in politics and protests within the region is clearer when discussing incidents directly related to the experiences of these women and the working conditions of their families which overlap with the 'consensus' of the mid-Victorian era.

### *Women and Community Protest*

The long tradition in the region of well-organized protest and strike against male working conditions did not exclude the participation of women. In areas on the Tyne and Wear and on the coalfields, women often took part in incidents of direct action which were

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<sup>131</sup> Belchem, 'Asylum-Seekers and the Northern Working Class', pp. 65, 72.

essentially community protests.<sup>132</sup> There are numerous examples of workers intimidating colliery owners with the threat of violence against machines, equipment, buildings and persons throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>133</sup> Seamen were also considered to be quick to take action in any dispute and would not stop short of blocking the passage of ships from the ports.<sup>134</sup> For example, in August 1825, there was a 'dreadful affray' in Sunderland, a 'melancholy riot' that resulted in four persons being killed, nine wounded and several drowned.<sup>135</sup> The three hour riot was the culmination of events during which the town had been in a 'state of considerable agitation'. The conflict between the ship-owners and the sailors of the port occurred when the owners began to send out ships manned with seamen who were not members of the 'Loyal Standard Union'. This union fixed a wage for voyages throughout the year, with higher rates during the winter, established a rule that all members must only sail in a vessel where all others on board belonged to the union, and founded a sick and shipwrecked fund for the families of its members. This was especially important given the rate of accident and sinking that occurred off the North East coast: of ships registered on the Tyne between 1830 and 1870 between 5% and 7% were lost at sea.<sup>136</sup> The refusal of the owners to meet the union's demand that extra money should be paid to seamen for casting the ballast led to the sailors preventing all ships not manned by members of the union to leave the port. The

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<sup>132</sup> Joyce Ellis, 'Urban Conflict and Popular Violence: The Guildhall Riots of 1740 in Newcastle upon Tyne', *International Review of Social History*, 25 (1980), pp. 332-49.

<sup>133</sup> See Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*, pp. 204-7. Records of such incidents are more detailed for the period studied here.

<sup>134</sup> See further Norman McCord, 'The Seamen's Strike of 1815 in North East England', *Economic History Review*, 21 (1968), pp. 127-43.

<sup>135</sup> The following paragraph is based upon 'An Account of a Melancholy Riot', contained in TWAS, DX 17/1, Scrapbook; An Account of the Dreadful Affray, contained in NCL, Collections Related to the History of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, from 1824-29; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 5 August 1825.

<sup>136</sup> John Foster, *Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution. Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London, 1974), p. 94.

sailors were initially successful in their blockade and the news that a ship was sailing without union members resulted in a large crowd of men and women assembling in protest near the Piers. The riot began when the women in the crowd began 'throwing stones in showers at the ship, and shouting in the most dismal manner.' Meanwhile the men 'procured what boats they could and rowed alongside for the purpose of boarding the vessel'. The military was called out in response and the riot act was read three times during which they were 'unmercifully pelted with large stones and missiles of every description, by the infuriated women, &c. collected on both sides of the river.' The riot ended when the military fired upon the mob, killing seven men and one woman.

A similar riot at Friar's Goose Colliery in May 1832 attracted great attention locally and also involved women acting alongside, and for the improved conditions of, male workers. There were a series of violent incidents during the first half of 1832 in the collieries of Hetton and the surrounding district, related to acts of reprisal against pitmen binding themselves against the Colliers' Union and the eviction of union members and their families from colliery owned houses.<sup>137</sup> The attempt by the owners of collieries on the Durham coalfield to break the mining unions led the owners to a decision in March of 1832 that they would refuse to employ union members at the April bindings. In May they began a process of mass eviction and the employing of blacklegs. Union members and their wives and families responded together. At South Shields men and women daily formed an intimidating crowd that blacklegs were forced to pass through on their way to the colliery whilst elsewhere women continually harassed those who defied the union and

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<sup>137</sup> The following is based upon, Anon., *Report of the Trials of the Pitmen and Others, Concerned in the Late Riots, Murders, &c., in the Hetton and Other Collieries, at the Durham Summer Assizes* (Durham, 1832); *Tyne Mercury*, 8 May 1832; and, *Newcastle Chronicle*, 5 August 1832. For the background to this discontent see Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*, *passim*.



continued to work.<sup>138</sup> The women were said to have 'excited the men beyond all bounds'.<sup>139</sup> The disturbances at Friar's Goose began in earnest after a group of pitmen from Tyne Main and Friar's Goose attacked and severely wounded two of the forty seven lead miners who had been employed by the owners. The remaining forty five miners were 'assailed in Gateshead by the pitmen's wives, who not only "cudgelled" them with their tongues, but threw stones at them'. Special constables were sworn in and two days after this incident entered Friar's Goose to eject the pitmen from the houses that by the detail of their previous bond they had engaged to quit by the middle of April. The whole village, men, women and children, and many from the surrounding area joined to resist the evictions and upwards of forty men and women were apprehended. The constables set about removing the furniture from the houses, but at the first house the wife of Thomas Carr refused to leave her home and was removed by carrying her into the street on the chair she was sat in. As she was carried out she knocked off his hat and waved it to the crowd crying 'union for ever'. Mrs Carr later claimed to have a certificate from her doctor saying she was too unwell to have been moved. Another woman, Elizabeth Laing aged 50, was picked out from the crowd of between one and three thousand as having been prominent in using abusive language. She was brought to trial but acquitted. Elizabeth Parkin, aged 50, was brought to trial and found guilty for the assault of Thomas Thew who had left the union and binded to work. He was attacked one evening by ten to twelve men and women who beat him with sticks. It was Parkin who delivered the last blow with a stone tied in a stocking. She was supposed to have knelt to the body and

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<sup>138</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 9 June 1832.

<sup>139</sup> NA, HO/52/19, Reed to Northumberland, 5 May 1832, quoted in David Ridley, 'Political and Industrial Crisis: The Experience of the Tyne and Wear Pitmen, 1831-32', Ph.D. thesis (University of Durham, 1994), p. 181.

said, as he held his breath, "'D—n him for a beast," or "for a b----r, he's done now; that has done him.'" It is likely that many incidents of violence went unrecorded as there was some doubt as to the propriety of arresting the women and those women who were brought to trial were dealt with leniently by the assize judge in comparison to the sentences given to the men, some of whom were sentenced to be hanged. This leniency was continued elsewhere. In June, twenty one women, 'the wives, daughters, and widows of pitmen' were brought before magistrates in Newcastle on the charge of riotous and violent assembly for their attack on a cartman at Benwell Colliery. These 'Amazonian assailants' were fined five shillings each despite the very serious injuries that the man sustained.<sup>140</sup>

Colls has argued that the activities of these women were marginal and were a relic of a 'technique of protest which should have had its day.'<sup>141</sup> This retrospective argument is difficult to maintain when union activities as they were experienced at the time is considered. Whilst the rioting, murders and assaults did signal a breakdown in the influence of union delegates who were against such incidents of direct violence, this underestimates the manner in which the community took action as a whole in what they perceived to be their best interests. Repelling the bailiffs was more than an act of defiance and protest but a protection of their homes that union action had been unable to secure, whilst attacking blacklegs might be seen as an act of community regulation that also ensured pressure was exerted upon the colliery owners. The owners were intent on destroying Thomas Hepburn's union and, despite Hepburn's efforts in ensuring members remained moderate and peaceful, the violence of 1832 was perhaps inevitable. If the

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<sup>140</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 9 June 1832.

<sup>141</sup> Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield*, p. 257.

activities of the women at these collieries were marginal then so too were those of the men they stood alongside at the evictions and baiting of blacklegs. Women acted on behalf and alongside their men-folk and their community in such activities even if they were excluded from formal union actions.

The intimidation of blacklegs by females was repeated during the strike of 1844 and it would seem that the men encouraged the women to attack the working men as they were less likely to be face retaliation or prosecution. The women were said to have 'assumed as offensive a position as that taken by their husbands' in riots at Castle Eden, Thornaby, South Wingate, Brancepath Park Colliery and elsewhere in Durham, showing an 'ill-restrained zeal'. Blacklegs might even be attacked by women not directly connected to the collieries but who had little sympathy with their actions. Three pitmen who worked at Oakwell but lived at Byker needed escorts from the police to protect them from the large mobs who followed and 'hooted them vehemently'. One evening the fishwives at Byker deluged the returning workers with a torrent of fish scraps and other 'offensive missiles' as they passed on their way home.<sup>142</sup> A pamphlet was published during the strike containing rhymes, some of which purported to have been written by the wives of pitmen. One woman called for the 'noble Colliery Lads' to stand fast, 'man to man' and 'stick unto the union', whilst praising the male union leaders Roberts and Beesley.<sup>143</sup> The wives of colliers were knowledgeable of union events and prominent in the community action that supplemented the union activities they were officially excluded from, although they did attend open air meetings alongside their pitmen.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 19 April 1844; 26 April 1844; 5 July 1844.

<sup>143</sup> Elizabeth Gair, 'The Colliery Union'; in NCL, L. 331.89, 'Pitmen's Strike'. See Appendix for full rhyme.

<sup>144</sup> The *Newcastle Courant* reported that a meeting of Tyne colliers at the Town Moor attracted a crowd of seven to eight thousand including the women; *Newcastle Courant*, 17 May 1844. In 1872 a march

Later on in this period the expansion of union activities ensured that women could partake in the community spirit that the pitmen enjoyed through the mining lodges that hosted dances and bazaars and the annual Gala attended by members and their wives.<sup>145</sup> One writer to the regionally published *Miners' Advocate and Record* went as far to suggest that their wives should 'take part in our meetings, in the general business of our associations'. He argued that 'men are often exhausted by hard work' and coupled with their indulgence in alcohol meant much important business was not fulfilled. 'Women', he continued, 'are full of sympathy for all that is good, and in my opinion they are quite as intelligent and capable of conducting the business of a society as men; moreover, they have more influence with the rising generation than men have, and in that respect they are capable of doing much good.'<sup>146</sup> It seems though that his suggestion was not taken up.<sup>147</sup>

Miners' wives were able, expected and encouraged to participate in the wider protests of their unionized men. This seems as true at the end of the period as the beginning, Jack Lawson claiming in his biography that the women were worse than the men during the strike action of 1892. It is easy to dismiss these activities as peripheral but they were part of the everyday actions that both men and women undertook and whilst accounts of male meetings may have dominated newspaper reports the continual pressure the informal activities created were likely to dominate the consciousness of men

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organised by the Durham Miners' Association witnessed 'long lines of miners, in many instances headed by bands and accompanied by wives and sisters', *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 3 January 1872. Many other examples could be given.

<sup>145</sup> Kenneth Brown, 'The Lodges of the Durham Miners' Association, 1869-1926', *Northern History*, 13 (1987), pp. 138-152; Lawson, *A Man's Life*, p. 121.

<sup>146</sup> *The Miners' Advocate and Record*, 2 May 1874.

<sup>147</sup> There is however some evidence of the involvement of the wives of union leaders in some areas. Jane Kane, wife of John Kane founder of the National Association of Ironworkers at Gateshead in 1862, was responsible for the administration of this union. The ironworkers acknowledged her contribution and presented her with a gold watch and gold guard, and a locket. See, Eric Taylor, 'Kane, John (1819-1876)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnd.com/view/article/47369>, accessed 31 May 2006].

and women more generally in these districts. These community protests allowed men and women to participate in similar roles, although the same cannot be said for the occasional food protests that occurred in the later half of this period. Whilst Purvis has suggested that food riots only survived after the mid-nineteenth century in 'parts of the country where the development of working-class consciousness and independent activity was more restricted than in the industrial north', there were prolonged food protests at Durham and Northumberland collieries, spreading to more urban areas, during the 1860s and 1870s, led by women.<sup>148</sup>

John Bohstedt has argued that the role of women in food riots during the eighteenth century has been exaggerated. Women were not the sole constituent of these riots: men and children were at least as prominent in the majority of incidents and Bohstedt is right to dismiss the feminine food riot as a myth. There is evidence that working-class men and women shopped for food together, even into the early part of this period; northern pitmen and their wives were said to have shopped together once a fortnight at nearby market towns.<sup>149</sup> A good deal of bad feeling could indeed arise from any price differences that occurred between the large towns in the region and the more rural areas, especially in the colliery districts, and men and women were prominent at food protests in defence of their living standards.<sup>150</sup> However, his judgement that the nineteenth-century food riots dominated by women were a symptom of female political

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<sup>148</sup> M. Purvis, 'Co-operative Retailing in England', p. 205. See also Pamela Horn, 'Food Riots in Devon, Somerset and Dorset in November, 1867', *Bulletin – Society for the Study of Labour History*, 42 (1981), pp. 22-26.

<sup>149</sup> DCRO, D/X 46/2, Pages from *The Table Book* (1827) containing an article "The Pitmen."

<sup>150</sup> NCL, L. 331.8, *The Colliers Friend; Being a Comprehensive View of the State of Society & Manners, in the Minery Districts on the Tyne and Wear, By A Well Wisher to Society* (North Shields, 1825), p.21.

weakness has perhaps been accepted too uncritically.<sup>151</sup> It could even be argued that of the examples drawn by Bohstedt from the North East, the foremost being the 1740 riots, men were participating predominantly due to trade disputes amongst the organised keelmen and that the mob may not have been as cohesive in this event as has been suggested. Nevertheless, Bohstedt suggests that the unionisation of male labour during the nineteenth century allowed men to take collective action that made such outbursts redundant: the continuation of protests against food price or scarcity, that became a predominantly female exercise, was symptomatic of a separation of gender roles and their exclusion from male dominated labour movements. Contrary to this argument the evidence from food protests in the colliery areas of the region shows a highly organised body of female activists.

The anti-beef agitation of 1872 was begun and led by the miners' wives of Durham and Northumberland and the movement later spread to the North West and elsewhere.<sup>152</sup> These protests were anticipated by discontent and protest during the 1860s over food prices. The high price of butcher meat was discussed as early as 1864 in local newspapers, who complained of prices at 7d per lb.<sup>153</sup> In July the following year it was said that 'every second man you meet is talking about the high price of butcher meat. Instead of getting lower it seems to be getting higher.' The local newspapers did not at this time cover in great detail the protests at the collieries at Durham and Northumberland, whose main supply of meat was from travelling butchers leaving them

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<sup>151</sup> John Bohstedt, 'Gender, Household and Community Politics: Women in English Riots, 1790-1810', *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), pp. 88-122. See also Susan Brown, "'A Just and Profitable Commerce': Moral Economy and the Middle Classes in Eighteenth Century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 32 (1993), pp. 305-32; and, Alan Booth, 'Food Riots in the North West of England, 1790-1801', *Past and Present*, 77 (1977), pp. 84-107.

<sup>152</sup> See the newspaper reports from Wigan and Bolton, in John, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, p. 126.

<sup>153</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 6 June 1864.

vulnerable to higher prices and increased the suspicion that they were being duped into paying unfair prices. There were press comments on the 'silly' meetings and resolutions passed in these areas and that the 'expectation seems really to have been entertained that a few weeks abstinence would bring the price of meat to its former level.' One newspaper suggested that it would be more profitable if the 'working men's wives should study the art of cooking more than they do. They prepare their food generally in a most extravagant fashion.'<sup>154</sup>

As cuts of meat rose to as high as one shilling per lb in 1872 the agitation began again in earnest and was supported in far greater numbers. This time it was taken more seriously by regional newspapers.<sup>155</sup> Differences were drawn by the press between the activities of the pitmen and their wives. The Durham Miners' Mutual Association had achieved great success in negotiating improved wages and conditions for pitmen, most significantly in the removal of the yearly bond, in February 1872. The peaceful passing of the inaugural miners' gala was contrasted with the

large, enthusiastic meetings of their wives which are taking place almost daily .... The meetings of the miners and the gathering of their wives, however, present a noticeable difference both in character and object. While the men had assembled chiefly to congratulate each other upon past successes, the women are holding their mass meetings by way of inaugurating a new campaign and initiating novel tactics for the future ....

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 31 July, 3 August, 10 August 1865.

<sup>155</sup> *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* prior to the protests had published a piece highlighting the importance of the 'great meat question' and suggested that tinned meat from Australia be used as a substitute, 27 Jan 1872.

The miners had to speak of concessions which their employers had been compelled to make; their wives have to tell of the alleged injustice of the butchers and provision dealers .... The miners have long had their innings at strikes; the women seem determined to have theirs now.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, these women seem to have taken inspiration from the successes the miners' union had achieved, as too did rural labourers who agitated for higher wages at this time.<sup>157</sup> Lead miners struck during April of this year and the putter-boys and driver-lads at Ryhope Colliery also went on strike for improved conditions against the wishes of the pitmen employed there.<sup>158</sup> The early 1870s witnessed droves of labourers nationwide joining unions, and the concept of trade unionism seems to have spread even to the non-working wives of colliery pitmen.<sup>159</sup>

Meetings were held regularly during June and July of 1872 by the women of individual colliery districts, the attendance at each ranging from a few hundred to over 1,500. The movement began with a meeting of 300 women at Murton Colliery and was quickly repeated at Ryhope, Silksworth, Seaton, Hebburn, Castle Eden, Jarrow, Shotton, Houghton-le-Spring, Seaham, Oakenshaw, Lumley, Shincliffe, Bishop Auckland, Spennymore and elsewhere, spreading to 'nearly all the colliery villages in the district' within a fortnight.<sup>160</sup> Unions or associations were formed in most places with

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<sup>156</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 21 June 1872.

<sup>157</sup> See for example *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 5 March 1872.

<sup>158</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 15, 22 April 1872; *Sunderland Times*, 25 June 1872; DCRO, NCB 1/RS 395, Ryhope Colliery Strike. It also coincided with an attempt by domestic labourers to shorten their hours of labour; see, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, June 1872.

<sup>159</sup> H.M. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1963).

<sup>160</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 22 June 1872. The movement seems not to have been as prominent in the urban areas of the region where costly meat could be more easily supplemented by inexpensive fish and tinned items from shopkeepers and fish markets.



subscriptions typically being a penny. By the end of June the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* could 'only barely indicate the places where the movement is going on, the various reports which come from all quarters being so voluminous.'<sup>161</sup> The protest, or strike, was not just against the high price of meat but that of milk, butter, cheese and potatoes. Unlike the food riots of the eighteenth century, which frequently reflected a number of grievances, over treatment of the poor or wages – such as the riots at Gateshead in 1795<sup>162</sup> – these protests were based solely upon price and characterized by a good deal of moderation and organisation between areas, whilst the abstention from these items were monitored within communities.

Some of the initial reports, whilst not dismissive of these food strikes – indeed if one were to judge from column inches alone the newspapers took them very seriously – revealed a mocking tone that chimed awkwardly with actual events. One of the first meetings of the women of Silksworth and Ryhope collieries was preceded by a procession 'of considerable length' accompanied by a band and headed by two banners of 'gaudy coloured calico' borne by boys. The boys in the crowd were said 'from the expressive grins on their countenances and their lusty shouts' to 'be enjoying the joke to the top of their bent.' This would appear to be a serious misinterpretation and misleadingly dismissive analysis given the report on the same page of the strike action amongst the colliery boys.<sup>163</sup> Some of the newspapers were indeed quick to suggest that the men failed to take these female meetings seriously but there is only one record of men breaking up a meeting and predominantly the men went beyond a mere toleration and actively supported the resolutions that their womenfolk passed.

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<sup>161</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 24 June 1872.

<sup>162</sup> Roger Wells, *Wretched Faces. Famine in Wartime England, 1793-1801* (Gloucester, 1988), p. 97.

<sup>163</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 25 June 1872.

Most meetings set a maximum price they were willing to purchase food at and typically for meat the price was fixed at 7d – 7 1/2d per lb. Mrs Robson, who spoke and chaired at a number of these open air meetings, urged the women to stand firm, and promised that she herself 'would eat herring until they could shell the scales off her'.<sup>164</sup> The women acted in unison and the resolutions were fixed upon everyone in each village. Pickets were sent to watch shops and blacklegs were reported at meetings, whilst committees were formed to check upon the contents of cooking pots and Sunday meals.<sup>165</sup> The Seaham women resolved to burn in effigy any woman who purchased meat above the resolved price and similar threats were made at other collieries. In ensuring participation in this collective action the women of Jarrow went as far as passing a resolution that fines of 3d be levied against those women who were absent from meetings.<sup>166</sup> These were not idle threats either. Three women were arrested, charged and fined for 'thrashing' John and Mary Clark who were accused of being blacklegs and at Dipton a number of women seized a blackleg and tarred and feathered her.<sup>167</sup> One woman who bought milk at above the settled price was spat-on in the face and thrown over a bridge. Another had the milk she had purchased poured over her dress and was then 'nipped and pulled about in a shameful manner' by her assailants.<sup>168</sup> A butcher at Sunnyside who attempted to continue his business in the area was met with a hail of stones and pieces of glass upon sight and soon joined those who were doing scarcely any business.<sup>169</sup> Less serious incidents of intimidation involved 'tin-panning' and the creation

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 22 June 1872.

<sup>165</sup> See for example the report of Blackhill and Wardley Colliery, *ibid.*, 29 June 1872.

<sup>166</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 15, 29 June 1872.

<sup>167</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 25 June 1872.

<sup>168</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 2 July 1872. The magistrates imposed £2 fines for the perpetrators or in default one months imprisonment.

<sup>169</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 5 July 1872.

of noise outside the homes of those who refused to do without meat. In one case a publican was surrounded by a crowd of angry women who cornered him on his return from the butchers. He was consequently induced to return the meat he had purchased.<sup>170</sup>

Although these women 'betrayed none of the hesitation in proceeding to action which generally characterises the proceedings of the sterner sex' those involved in the movement did not lack a consideration of what was achievable, nor were their suggestions for improving the supply of food to colliery areas lacking in what might have been thought considerable solidarity and knowledge if undertaken by men. The proposed prices of beef were not chosen arbitrarily but calculated so as not to be fixed too low to 'place it beyond the power of the butchers to bring them good beef at all.'<sup>171</sup> The food strikes were for the benefit of the local community and when their action was thought to endanger the health of residents action was taken to remedy this: resolutions were passed at many of the collieries to allow women with young children or ill family members to purchase milk for them above the agreed price. There was, furthermore, the perception amongst the participant women that they were engaged in a new form of protest, despite the parallels that can be drawn with the exclusive dealing many engaged in during the Chartist movement. The food strike was seen as a female led protest for the benefit of both men and women and though the purchase of food was seen as a female issue they perceived they were acting on behalf of their communities. Mrs Robson spoke not only of the high cost of provisions but complained of the low pay hewers received in relation to the other men at the pit. This 'petticoat strike' was, Robson said, 'such a strike as had

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<sup>170</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 15, 17 June 1872.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 June 1872.

never been in England.'<sup>172</sup> Mary Errington a speaker at Seaham, later elected the President of the Women's Union there, expressed her wish that she had been born a man and complained that 'we are ordered to be quiet, to keep silence in the Church, but we don't follow his law. (Hear, Hear.) We are not going to be frightened .... You will make it all right; if not, we'll have a bonny lot of men offering to speak.' The meeting had in fact, as with many others, been officiated by a man, in this case because there had been so many remarks made about women alone holding the meeting, although the speakers as was predominantly the case elsewhere were all female. Errington went on to tell the meeting that 'this bill's to pass for women's rights ... stand to our flag; England shall never be slaves. If we're petticoat clothed, we're major minded. Petticoat government's been a long time in starting, but we will exert our rights and prove faithful to our cause.'<sup>173</sup> The associations formed at these meetings counteracted the threat by local butchers to call in the money owed by those who had previously bought meat on tick through subscription funds. These were founded so as to pay the collective debt of the village off on a monthly basis. Many of the meetings resolved to form with their men-folk co-operative butchers for their villages, some proposing to employ men to collect cattle at market days at the rate of their current employment, whilst there were volunteers to build sheds for this enterprise where there were no suitable buildings available.<sup>174</sup> The cause of high meat prices was also addressed; a meeting of the 'housewives of Gateshead' was held in July to organise a protest against the restrictions imposed on the importation of foreign cattle. In 1878 it was approximated that half of the livestock passing through Newcastle meat market came from foreign markets, indicating the local demand for meat

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<sup>172</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 25 June 1872.

<sup>173</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18 June 1872.

<sup>174</sup> These co-operatives do seem to have lasted long and faded out as the price of meat dropped.

and reliance on supplies from abroad. Local opposition to the Cattle Diseases Bill (of that year) was dominated by male politicians and cattlemen, but the events of these meat strikes clearly show that women were able and willing to understand and participate in such a campaign.<sup>175</sup>

From the middle of July 1872, prices had begun to drop as butchers compromised over prices and whilst reports of food strikes fizzled out they were replaced in the regional press by shorter pieces describing the movement against high meat prices, inspired by the action taken in the North East, at Worcester, Wigan and West Bromwich. The food strikes in this region were undertaken and organised by women and supported by their men-folk, despite the protestations by some that the men had no choice in the matter. Flags and banners were created for the movement whilst bands were hired to play at processions. Female orators were hired to speak in areas other than their own, the meetings of which whilst occasionally rowdy were not, unlike the retributions, violent, allowing children and babies to be brought. Although there are many aspects of continuity between these food protests and the food riots of the eighteenth century, they were also more focused upon a sole issue.<sup>176</sup> Self-regulatory and efficiently organised over large distances they were clearly influenced by the miners' unions. These women organised politically in collective action. The strikes were not a sudden outburst of violent action but a considered response to the problems they faced in feeding themselves and their families, which reflected a real attempt at exerting their political power. The

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<sup>175</sup> See, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, February, July; and, Jonathan Spain, 'Free Trade, Protectionism and the "Food of the People": the Liberal Opposition to the Cattle Diseases Bill of 1878', in Eugenio Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865-1931* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 168-92.

<sup>176</sup> Eighteenth century food riots, following Thompson, have most often situated food riots within a wider context of antagonistic class relations; E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76-136; Andrew Charlesworth and Adrian J. Randall, 'Morals, Markets and the English Crowd in 1766', *Past and Present*, 114 (1987), pp. 200-213.

movement seems also to have roused an interest in the conditions of work amongst the small number of women who worked in colliery areas: the female field workers and washerwomen of Ryhope and Silksworth formed a short-lived union for the protection of the interest of female labour and a determination was expressed to not work for less than the wages they had set, after some debate, for particular tasks.<sup>177</sup>

Working-class women were involved in a number of political campaigns and protests in this period. There was a clear appetite for political organisation and debate when working-class women could access and understand the issues as directly relevant to the lives and well being of themselves or others. It is important to note that when the conception of radical politics expanded, to include critiques of lived experience, so too did the support from both men and women: 'working men simply could not restrict themselves to abstract constitutional issues; hunger and poverty were important issues for them as well as women and children.'<sup>178</sup> Women were knowledgeable of political events and were able to place their experiences within a wider context and articulate their grievances. If much of this was informal, it must be remembered that for most of this period working-class men too were struggling to gain access to politics on the public stage. It was not until after the 1884 Reform Act that miners and agricultural labourers got the vote and although no category of males were excluded from the franchise after 1884, the residency clause and lodger franchise ensured young men were under-represented, although probably around two-thirds of adult males now held the vote.<sup>179</sup> Male political activity in this period was often in defence of their working conditions, but the lack of employment opportunities for women and the experience of the workplace, as

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<sup>177</sup> *Sunderland Times*, 25 June 1872; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 25 June 1872.

<sup>178</sup> Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 174.

<sup>179</sup> Searle, *A New England?*, p. 133.

well as early marriage patterns did not leave working-class women unable to organise protest or appreciate political debate. However, working-class women in the North East were less prominent politically in the later period, where political activities centred around political organisations rather than political movements and protest.

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## **WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS, C.1870-1914**

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The focus in this section falls inevitably upon the later part of the period and looks at female involvement in Liberal, Labour and Conservative political organisations, as well as the suffrage movement. This section examines the role of working-class women and the extent of their support for the political goals of these organisations. It is at times difficult to distinguish the extent of working-class support for these organisations as the predominantly middling-class leadership often serves to draw focus from the social makeup of these bodies as a whole. The women involved here often took a very public role, but the politics they were concerned with frequently symbolised a movement away from the defence of communal causes, or empathy with the position of others, described previously, into more theoretical and high political debate. We begin with the case of an anti-Boer war meeting at Newcastle, which will illuminate some of the themes (and evidential problems) of this section.

South Africa, distant and unknown to most towards the end of the 1890s was by the turn of the twentieth century uncomfortably familiar. The bioscope brought moving images from the war to music hall audiences, soldiers were used to advertise products, whilst newspapers such as the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Illustrated London News*, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* provided readers with a steady stream of vivid, and sometimes

unrealistically dramatic, accounts of war correspondents.<sup>180</sup> The war was generally popular, but was opposed by a minority of the population backed by influential leaders of public opinion, such as C.P. Scott, John Morley, Keir Hardie, and in the North East, Robert Spence Watson.<sup>181</sup> The peace movement was mostly non-conformist and whilst anti-war sentiments were frequently expressed in print, attempts at public meetings were frequently disrupted and broken up by crowds of patriotic 'Jingoistic' supporters.<sup>182</sup> Although Richard Price has claimed that the London working class at this time had little political interest in the war, working-class patriotism does seem to have been evident in the North-East: at Morpeth the relief of Mafeking was met with 'tremendous celebrations culminating in a bonfire on Silver Hill'.<sup>183</sup> The attitude of candidates at the 1900 election seems certain to have influenced local outcomes, anti-war Liberal candidates suffering a downturn of their vote at Middlesbrough, Stockton and Morpeth whilst pro-war Liberals increased their vote at Hartlepool and South Shields.<sup>184</sup> Such patriotism spilled over into an unruly pursuit of pro-peace organisers at Gateshead in March 1900.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> David Omissi and Andrew Thompson (eds.), *The Impact of the South African War* (Basingstoke, 2002); Peter Warwick, (ed.), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Harlow, 1980); Searle, *A New England?*, pp. 284-85.

<sup>181</sup> Bernard Porter, 'The Pro-Boers in Britain', in Warwick, *The South African War*, pp. 239-57; Mark Hampton, 'The Press, Patriotism, and Public Discussion: C.P. Scott, *The Manchester Guardian*, and the Boer War, 1899-1902' *The Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 177-97.

<sup>182</sup> Paul Laity, 'The British Peace Movement and the War', in Omissi and Thompson (eds.), *The Impact of the South African War*, pp. 138-56. See also, Thomas Kennedy, 'The Quaker Renaissance and the Origins of the Modern British Peace Movement, 1895-1920', *Albion*, 16 (1984), pp. 243-72.

<sup>183</sup> NRO, 1666, Notes of the Recollections of Miss Thompson and Miss Scott.

<sup>184</sup> Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-Class Attitudes and Reaction to the Boer War, 1899-1902* (London, 1972); Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, pp. 221-22. Working-class support in the North East for anti-war movements during the 1870s seems to have been eroded by the 1890s. See, Owen Ashton, 'W.E. Adams and Working Class Opposition to Empire, 1878-80: Cyprus and Afghanistan', *North East Labour History*, 27 (1993), pp. 49-74.

<sup>185</sup> Domestic reaction to the Boer War has been rightly highlighted as influential upon the women's suffrage movement, although there is insufficient space to address this issue here. See, Laura Nym Marshall, 'The South African War and the Origins of Suffrage Militancy in Britain, 1899-1902', in Ian Fletcher, Laura Nym Marshall and Philippa Levine (eds.), *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race* (London, 2000), pp. 3-17; Jon Lawrence, 'Contesting the Male Polity: The Suffragettes and the Politics of Disruption in Edwardian Britain', in Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*, pp. 223-24.



One of the chief organisers of the disrupted meeting was Elizabeth Spence Watson, the wife of Robert Spence Watson, founder of the Newcastle Liberal Association, later president of the National Liberal Federation, an attorney who had once threatened to indict Disraeli and author of the 1879 publication *The History of English Rule and Policy in South Africa*. Although he refused to stand as an MP, his obituary in *The Times* noted that 'probably no other man outside Parliament exerted a wider political influence than he did' and thousands lined the streets of Newcastle and Gateshead at his funeral.<sup>186</sup> His obituary also claimed that Elizabeth played 'no part in public life'. On the contrary, Elizabeth was the founder and President of Newcastle Women's Liberal Association, a member of Gateshead Board of Guardians for eighteen years, an outspoken agitator on issues of peace, women's suffrage, education, temperance, anti-slavery and Home Rule for Ireland, who spoke regularly at public meetings and had letters published in local newspapers, such as *The Northern Echo* and the *Newcastle Daily Leader*.<sup>187</sup> Both Robert and Elizabeth were critics of the Boer War. Lady Carlisle had sought Robert's assistance in promoting the peace campaign in the North West, whilst Elizabeth was requested to speak at a Women's Peace meeting in London.<sup>188</sup>

Prior to the meeting in March, Robert Spence Watson had spoken at a gathering at Newcastle Town Hall, alongside Thomas Burt, to a mixed crowd which quickly descended into disorder.<sup>189</sup> The meeting at Gateshead was unable even to get this far. Although much thought and many committee meetings had gone into organising the

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<sup>186</sup> *The Times*, 3, 7 March 1911. See also *The Annual Monitor* (London, 1912), pp. 177-197; and, Peter Corder, *The Life of Robert Spence Watson* (London, 1914).

<sup>187</sup> *The Annual Monitor* (London, 1920); Newcastle Robinson Library (hereafter NRL), Papers of Robert and Elizabeth Spence Watson; TWAS ACC 213, The Letters of Mabel Spence Watson.

<sup>188</sup> NRL, SW/1/3/14, Lady Carlisle to Robert Spence Watson, 10 September 1899; TWAS, ACC 213/278, Elizabeth Spence Watson to Robert Spence Watson, 19 June 1900.

<sup>189</sup> Thomas Burt was a working-class miner turned Liberal MP for Morpeth.

Gateshead meeting in March, Elizabeth admitted in a letter to her daughter that their mistake was in attempting to hold the meeting at Gateshead Town Hall the use of which had required council permission. This was granted but on the condition that the committee was responsible for any damage to the interior and exterior of the building.<sup>190</sup> The meeting was due to be ticketed to prevent rowdy elements gaining entrance, but on the morning of the meeting it was found that some local councillors being 'almost off their heads' with anger had put word out of the meeting and that a jingo protest was being organized. Elizabeth summoned by telegram for the committee of men and women to meet early that evening and although they initially decided to carry forward with their plans, when they arrived at the hall an hour before the meeting was due to go ahead they were confronted by a large and noisy mob who had gathered in front of the town hall. Unionist propagandists were prominent and a number of men distributed pro-war pamphlets amongst the crowd. The meeting was cancelled on the advice of the Chief Constable and an impromptu meeting was instead held outside the hall by the protestors. They passed resolutions in support of the Government and, after a number of speakers had roused the crowd, a procession led by a brass band proceeded to Bensham Grove, the home of Elizabeth Spence Watson, where the committee and their intended speakers had retired to hold a private meeting. Those at Bensham had been given notice that a 'riot was coming' and the police were called to assist in protecting them. A further meeting was held by the crowd outside the house and a number of windows were broken. The crowd took some time to disperse and the female members of the committee had to be escorted home; 'And all this in our "Free England"!'.

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<sup>190</sup> TWAS, ACC 213/275, Elizabeth Spence Watson to Mabel Spence Watson, 10 March 1900. The following paragraph is based upon this letter and newspaper cutting contained within.

The crowd were undoubtedly incensed by the prominence of the Boer S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, who experienced similar hostility elsewhere on his lecture tour. Discontent focused, as it did with Joshua Rowntree after his promotion of a Cronwright-Schreiner lecture at Scarbrough, upon local organisers, in this case the Spence Watsons.<sup>191</sup> There was the perception that the meeting had originated through Robert, but he was actually at this time in Hexham lecturing to their nonconformist literary society on the poems of Arthur Hugh Clough. Although Elizabeth was certainly an extraordinary and atypical character, the incident at the Town Hall and Bensham Grove neatly encapsulates some of the issues relating to women and politics at the end of the period of this study. Despite the prominence of Elizabeth Spence Watson (and other women) in organising the meeting, her position on the 'Stop-the-War Committee' and her hosting of the guest speaker, she was virtually ignored in the press reports of the incident, there was no mention of the female members on the committee and it was assumed by the pro-war element that her husband, not her, was the driving force of this event at Bensham Grove. This would have been an easy mistake to make given his role in supporting the Boers during both Anglo-Boer Wars, but ignores the role Elizabeth played prior to the meeting and on the day in calling the committee together. It may have been the male members who made the decision not to go ahead with the gathering once they arrived at the town hall, but there was in reality no decision to be made given the demands of the council and the strong advice of the Chief Constable to call off the meeting in light of the huge crowds assembling. Despite Elizabeth's prominent hand in organizing and speaking out against war her role seems to have been neglected by newspapers and local

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<sup>191</sup> Edward H. Milligan, 'Rowntree, Joshua (1844–1915)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/41237>, accessed 24 April 2006].

opposition alike. It is useful to consider that Elizabeth felt it was right for her to speak in public against government policy, on this and many other issues, that she was a recognizable leader of opinion and speaker amongst the social and political circles she moved in and that her work was known to Gladstone but not to the Gateshead press and that she could be labelled as having no part in public affairs. In reality, as the most prominent women in Gateshead the majority of the crowd who protested outside her home would have known her work, her position on the war and most likely her views on other issues and the local press were not slow to publish pieces on her many other involvements. Even within the constraints of obituary conventions, it can only be attributed to a stroke of ignorance that *The Times* could say she had no interest in public affairs. When the Newcastle Liberal Club threw a dinner in honour of Robert and Elizabeth during the spring of 1896 a toast was proposed to the guests in which it was said that she had

not only been saying "ditto; to her husband all the time, but had done splendid work on her own account, notably in the cause of women's suffrage." She replied, "that women had been supposed to shine, if at all, with a borrowed light, but a century ago they were not supposed to have any light at all, and two hundred years ago they were burnt and tortured as witches, but it was nearly always witches and rarely the prototype of the male sex who were burned, because the latter made the laws."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Corder, *Robert Spence Watson*, p. 270.

Those who knew Elizabeth would have recognised a determination to campaign for the benefit of others across a range of issues. The close association of her husband in many of the same activities clouded the extent to which she was perceived as expressing her own resolve and feeling by those less familiar with her work. For those who had not heard of the Spence Watsons it might not even be assumed that she was dittoing her husband, or if she was her actions fell under the scope of marital duties. Perhaps Robert's description in his *Reminiscences* of Elizabeth – 'no man ever found such a helpmate' – would have not helped alter anyone's opinion if they had thought as much, the only independent work of hers he described being her efforts to establish a school of cookery.<sup>193</sup> He was more vocal on her activities elsewhere and confided in a letter to his daughter, detailing Elizabeth's role in presiding at a ladies anti-vivisection meeting, that he considered her 'a martyr, a heroine, a most undoubted angelica and noble women.'<sup>194</sup>

The account of events here underlines the unreliability of newspaper reports in revealing the true extent of female participation. As far as possible the following section balances newspaper reports with available archive material. The events at Gateshead furthermore reflect the continuing division between what was popularly considered political questions that could be addressed by men alone, even if female activists disagreed. The important work of the women's movement on the national stage in addressing this imbalance and challenging the perception that there were unfeminine fields of action prior to the First World War has been covered in much depth elsewhere. The following discussion will examine the difficulties and successes of female political organisations in the region during the later part of this period.

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<sup>193</sup> Robert Spence Watson, *Reminiscences of the Late Rt. Hon. Robert Spence Watson* (York, 1969), p. 26, 72, *passim*.

<sup>194</sup> TWAS, ACC 213/285, Robert Spence Watson to Mabel Spence Watson, 29 June 1901.

The Corrupt Practices Act of 1883, designed to stem the cost and corruption of elections, made it illegal to employ and pay agents for canvassing or other election work, and had the effect of increasingly bringing women into contact with organised electoral work. Encouraged to join auxiliary organisations these women acted essentially as unpaid volunteers, but in doing so were familiarized with contemporary political issues, even if this was firmly in the realm of 'male' politics. The politics of the North East for the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the First World War, as was also the case for most of this period, was dominated by the Liberal party. Only at Tynemouth and Durham City could Unionist candidates claim some sort of success, whilst the Lib-Lab outlook of many Trade Unions and even working-class MPs such as Thomas Burt dampened the advance of Labour, so that in 1914 of the twenty five MPs representing the region nineteen were Liberals.<sup>195</sup> The disappointment when the expected return of a Liberal candidate at Newcastle in 1895 failed to materialize prompted Sir Edward Grey to suggest that 'one has to be careful not to expect too much from great masses of men.'<sup>196</sup> Similar thoughts were expressed, away from the frustration of defeat, by those involved in the politics of the North East at this time. Robert Spence Watson was dismayed that by the early 1900s political meetings, such as the one at which Lord Hartington had packed the Tyne Theatre in 1875, no longer had the appeal they once had: 'We cannot, apparently, crowd the Town Hall unless we get some very special man down, and I very

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<sup>195</sup> A.W. Purdue, 'Jarrow Politics, 1885-1914: The Challenge to Liberal Hegemony', *Northern History*, 18 (1982), pp. 182-198. See also, A.W. Purdue, 'George Lansbury and the Middlesbrough Election of 1906', *International Review of Social History*, 18 (1973), pp. 333-52; and, A.W. Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East of England', in David James, Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn (eds.), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax, 1992), pp. 17-42.

<sup>196</sup> NRL, SW/1/7/54, Sir Edward Grey to Robert Spence Watson, 1 August 1895.

much doubt, if Lord Hartington were still with us, whether we could fill it for him.'<sup>197</sup> W.E. Adams contended in his newspaper column that the working man was no longer interested in politics and was only concerned by 'more wage and more football'.<sup>198</sup> Some of this must be attributed to success of the Conservative appeal to the working-classes as they were, rather than seeking to change or lecture to them. There were of course many men committed to and who cherished their involvement and interest in politics at this time, the problem being that it is far more likely for some trace of their interest to remain in the historical record: few put pen to paper to document their disinterest in events. Similar discretion must be shown towards balancing the evidence of female participation in organised politics; Elizabeth Spence Watson may have been particularly well informed and well connected to the politics of the day, but at Middlesbrough an entire town of working-class women were said to be on the whole 'curiously devoid of public spirit or interest in outside affairs. ... There are, to be sure, among them women interested in their husbands' work and in the outside world, but there are also many who simply go on from day to day without taking any part in the wider life outside them, without being in the least interested in any public question.'<sup>199</sup>

### *The Primrose League*

The Primrose League had been established in 1883 as a means of broadening the Conservative party's appeal across the widened electorate – although it was formally independent from the party – and was open to men and women. The League was

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<sup>197</sup> Watson, *Reminiscences*, p. 77. Hartington, in 1875, had become leader of the Liberal opposition in the Commons upon the retirement of Gladstone.

<sup>198</sup> *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 25 June 1898.

<sup>199</sup> Bell, *At the Works*, p. 233.

organised into local 'habitations' and could boast an impressive membership, with families often joining as a whole. Around one in fourteen men and women over the age of sixteen was a member of the Primrose League at Seaham Harbour. At Crook and Barnard Castle specifically female organisations were in operation; around one in twenty females over the age of sixteen was a member at Crook, whilst at Barnard Castle the figure was as high as one in ten.<sup>200</sup> Although men were far from discouraged the organisation was viewed, often by its critics, as a particularly female endeavour, but nationally only around half the membership was female.<sup>201</sup> The *Northern Review* commented in 1886 that a 'lady actively engaging herself in political work immediately loses a peculiar charm, which attaches to her nature in her proper sphere ... Ye gentle dames, who wish to adorn the domestic circle, who seek to avoid the paths of a lonely and solitary existence on the barren rock of spinsterhood, shun politics as you would poison.'<sup>202</sup> Such predictions seem not to have been the deterrent they were intended to be and women joined in large numbers at the branches formed across the region in this period. Through the Primrose League women became formally involved in party political work, although the Conservatives at this time were, despite individual declarations of support for women's suffrage, generally ambivalent in their attitude towards women and the values espoused by female members of the League until they had gained the vote.<sup>203</sup> There has been a tendency by historians to view the movement for women's enfranchisement as a 'pre-eminently Liberal cause' and the Conservative women

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<sup>200</sup> Figures are based upon census data and membership numbers recorded in newspaper cuttings in DCRO, D/LO/F 552, 558, 563; DCRO, D/WN/1/4.

<sup>201</sup> Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880-1935* (Oxford, 1985), p. 49. At Morpeth just over 50% of all members between 1892-99 were female; NRO, 2196/2, Register of Members.

<sup>202</sup> *Northern Review*, 18 December 1886.

<sup>203</sup> David Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty. The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), pp. 129-52.



who worked on Primrose Leagues have conventionally been perceived as 'compliant and timid in contrast to the more radical women of the Liberal and Labour parties'.<sup>204</sup> The important role Conservative women played in the suffrage movement has been dealt with elsewhere and it is sufficient to note that Primrose League activities alone did not encompass the wealth of activities some of these women undertook. The social festivities that were organised by (and to some members were clearly central to the appeal of) the League did however allow rivals to trivialise the movement: 'its enemies laugh at its *social side* and ridicule its *teas* and its *concerts* and its *dances*. They ridicule also the prominent part that is taken by the Dames.'<sup>205</sup>

The social functions of the League were undoubtedly its great strength. Beyond the 'mock feudal rituals' lay an environment in which men and women brushed with members of high society and the landed elite.<sup>206</sup> Lord and Lady Londonderry regularly held their annual Primrose League fetes at the grounds of their home, Wynyard Park, and the local habitation was said to have been an 'exceedingly strong one due to the active interest which Lady Londonderry takes in its affairs.'<sup>207</sup> The fetes were accompanied by various entertainments, such as the music supplied by the Londonderry Band, and after tea speeches were given (often only ten or fifteen minutes in length), the value of such

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<sup>204</sup> Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women. A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford, 2002), p. 102; Mitzi Martia Auchterlonie, 'Conservative Women, The Conservative Party, and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1867-1914', Ph.D. thesis (University of Essex, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>205</sup> TWAS, DF/A/33/1, Undated Speech, c. 1895. The speech was given by William Armstrong Watson, great-nephew of William Armstrong, armaments manufacturer at Elswick, who inherited the Armstrong estates and an additional surname earning him the nickname Wawa.

<sup>206</sup> Searle, *A New England?*, p. 206.

<sup>207</sup> *The North Star*, 14 September 1903. The Primrose League was also assisted in South Durham by a split in the Pease family – traditionally staunch Liberals – over the issue of Home Rule.

events being that they 'drew all classes and ranks together'.<sup>208</sup> On the opening of a local branch at Middlesbrough it was remarked, in an about turn by the *Northern Review*, that

the introduction of the social element into their gatherings has a much greater influence than most people are willing to admit. Mrs Jones is only too glad to mix in the same society as Lady ----- whilst Mr Jones feels himself six inches higher, after shaking hands with my Lord. Joking apart, however, these meetings must tend to join more closely the various classes, and I can see that by this intermixture, a new life and energy will be infused into conservatism, which will take their opponents all their time to withstand.<sup>209</sup>

These entertainments were attended in large numbers. At the hearing of an election petition from Hexham in 1892 it was complained that the League had distributed tickets to its tea party indiscriminately amongst non-electors and poor people. The election agent at Hexham denied that the meeting had been held to promote the Unionist candidature – although a vote of confidence in his favour was carried – but that the meeting was 'got up for the promotion of sports'. At a further tea meeting held before the election the caterer had been requested to provide arrangements for 300 people, but 'many more came and there was a delay in getting food, and it was more like a bear-garden than anything else.' The suggestion of general treating was denied.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Lady Londonderry quoted in undated newspaper article, DCRO, D/LO/F 563, Newspaper Cuttings; See also, DCRO, D/LO F 552, 558.

<sup>209</sup> *Northern Review*, 22 January 1887.

<sup>210</sup> *The Times*, 26 November 1892.

The social elements were genuinely important, but they were only part of the work of the Primrose League. It was generally only at annual events that attendance by a Lord or Lady could be guaranteed, whilst supporters themselves recognised that if the movement stood 'even comparatively still, and relies too much, as it undoubtedly does in London, on soup and salaams, badges and banquets, it will surely be overtaken by the other side.'<sup>211</sup> A focus upon the socialising that the League allowed can also serve to undermine its political functions. As many members were keen to stress 'it was the first society which organised the tremendous force which women possessed for political work, and although their opponents had tried to imitate them the imitation was a poor one, for, unlike the Radicals, who had their Women's Liberal Association, there was no squabbling.'<sup>212</sup> There was certainly no room for dissent within the promise to uphold and support such all embracing causes as Empire, Anglicanism and Monarchy. Vague statements, such as 'women ought to have their share in guiding the destinies of the Empire', reassured female members of their place within the movement, but reveal little of their actual work.<sup>213</sup> Far more revealing and representative of the League are comments by one member that the 'League is an admirable organisation for disseminating political knowledge amongst the working classes who, now that they have votes, ought to be instructed how to use them.'<sup>214</sup>

The Primrose League made great inroads in working-class districts of Newcastle, especially in the Elswick habitation where most men were employed at the munitions works where Armstrong and his great-nephew were influential. The Elswick branch won

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<sup>211</sup> *Northern Review*, 23 July 1887.

<sup>212</sup> DCRO, D/X 322/15, Stockton Conservative Association Newspaper Cuttings, 1890-98, undated, 1894.

<sup>213</sup> TWAS, DF/A/33/1, 'Undated Speech, c. 1895'.

<sup>214</sup> DCRO, D/X 332/274, Thomas Surtees Raine to Elizabeth Irwin, 9 November 1889.

the first prize for 'zeal and activity' in 1896 at the national meeting in Covent Garden and in Newcastle as a whole there were 3,000 League members in 1892 rising to 6,000 by 1895, when both Newcastle seats were taken by the Conservatives.<sup>215</sup> The women volunteers of the Primrose League worked tirelessly in canvassing, building up a register of voters and tracking down removals; at Darlington in preparation for the 1898 by-election 690 of 720 removals were traced by female members.<sup>216</sup> Printed literature on canvassing was distributed nationally to each habitation. These suggested the formation of 'canvassing and instruction classes' to instruct members not only in the work of canvassing but to deal with and explain prominent political questions, often dealt with in leaflets to be handed out during their work, 'so that would-be canvassers may be well equipped to cope with all questions.'<sup>217</sup> At the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations annual meeting, held in Newcastle in 1894, a resolution was passed in favour of granting widows and unmarried female taxpayers the vote. George Renwick, the President of the Divisional Council of the Primrose League at Newcastle, made a speech calling for a wider franchise of women to be proposed arguing that the work of the female Primrose League members in canvassing and committee work made it difficult to do otherwise: 'it is not a hard case indeed, when we see intelligent education women driving voters to the poll, very often not nearly so intelligent or so well educated in politics as themselves ... the unfortunate lady who has perhaps driven the voter, has to stop outside and bear the hoots and jeers, in many cases, of the opponents.'<sup>218</sup> As well as specifically political activities the League was financially reliant upon the work of

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<sup>215</sup> Mary. H. Krout, *A Looker-On In London* (London, 1899), p. 128; Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, pp. 125-28.

<sup>216</sup> Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987), p. 55.

<sup>217</sup> NRO, 2196/10, 2196/14, Records of the Morpeth Habitation.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted in Auchterlonie, 'Conservative Women', p. 106.

members in the raising of funds. At the Morpeth habitation at least half of the volunteers who raised money through entertainments were women, although they were far more likely to be recorded at multiple events than the men and the tasks they performed seem to have brought in a disproportionate amount of the overall income.<sup>219</sup>

The Primrose League was a huge success, both in more rural areas such as Barnard Castle and Morpeth, as well as in urban centres such as Newcastle and Darlington. This success was in no little part due to the inexplicit goals, duties, and reasons for membership and even the League's avowed aloofness from party politics. It was variously an organisation allowing for socialising amongst local elites with the significant benefit of subsidized drinks and amusements, supporting the Unionists, upholding religious principles, defending the values of Empire, organising election campaigns, and the expression of political beliefs. Nationally it was mainly the aristocratic and upper-classes members who exerted any form of influence upon the League, whilst locally policy suggestions were eschewed in favour of appeals to the lower-classes through programmes of entertainment. Crucially though, it allowed for a significant variation in involvement from joining as an associate (who did not contribute to running costs) attending entertainments as a paying guest, through to managing the canvass of electors. The actual number of women involved in the most overtly political activities of the League was small; more important in the context of working class women was their exposure to the political messages that they were gently tutored in at meetings and entertainments. Politically, the League acted in support of men, but in doing so educated women members in political issues and processes. As the Liberal Millicent Garrett Fawcett reluctantly acknowledged, the Primrose League did 'more to

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<sup>219</sup> NRO, 2196/3, Morpeth Cash Book, 1892-1896.

give women the position which has been so long and so rigidly withheld than any other organisation in this or in any period of the world's history.'<sup>220</sup>

### *Women and the Liberal Party*

If the attitude of the Conservative party towards women and women's suffrage was ambivalent that of the Liberals was confused: women's suffrage was 'a pre-eminently liberal cause which was persistently thwarted by influential Liberals.'<sup>221</sup> The Liberal response to the Primrose League was an organization where, unlike their Unionist rival, membership was open only to women, the Women's Liberal Federation founded in 1887. This brought together local Liberal associations or branches. Internal conflict during the 1880s over the issue of women's suffrage and the extent to which Women's Liberal Associations should pursue this as a main goal of the organisation or treat it as one of a number of important Liberal issues led to the formation of a further auxiliary body, the Women's National Liberal Association, for those who thought the feminism of the WLF too strident and potentially damaging to the Liberal Party.<sup>222</sup> By the end of this period there were around 150,000 members in the two Liberal organisations compared to the 500,000 female members of the Primrose League.

The more overtly political nature of the Liberal organisations can be seen from the objectives of the association given by the Newcastle and Gateshead WLA:

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<sup>220</sup> Quoted in Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory* (London, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>221</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, p. 120.

<sup>222</sup> Sixty local associations and around 10,000 members broke with this new body. Analysis and description of this schism, and the general response of the Liberal party on the issue of suffrage, can be found in, Claire Hirshfield, 'Fractured Faith: Liberal Party Women and the Suffrage Issue in Britain, 1892-1914', *Gender and History*, 2 (1990), pp. 173-97. See also, Pugh, *The March of the Women*, Chapter Six.

1. – The promotion of Liberal principles, and the diffusion of knowledge among women, on political questions of general and local interest, by means of lectures, discussions, and dissemination of literature.
2. – To help the Liberal party generally in the district in all legitimate ways, always endeavouring to uphold a high political ideal.
3. – To urge upon all women ratepayers to use the votes they already possess, and to press forward the question of the Parliamentary enfranchisement of women.<sup>223</sup>

The influence of Elizabeth Spence Watson can be seen in the forth objective of this association, being to promote peace, the Newcastle and Gateshead WLA giving this matter a prominence not shared by other WLA. This WLA also placed a stress upon votes for women almost from its inception.<sup>224</sup> The WLA at Newcastle and Gateshead had a membership of 700 at the end of 1892, paling in comparison to the 3,000 men and women who joined the Primrose League at Newcastle. When the success of individual charitable bodies is taken into account – which could attract large active committees of women – the figures look even bleaker.<sup>225</sup> Although membership was only slightly below the average membership of each branch nationwide, given the traditional

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<sup>223</sup> Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, DY 114, Annual Reports for the Two Years Ending 1892.

<sup>224</sup> It had been formed by Elizabeth Spence Watson in 1886, and votes for women were carried as an objective of this WLA from 1887; Elizabeth Spence Watson, 'Newcastle-upon-Tyne Women's Liberal Association, 1886-1911', contained in Newcastle WLA Annual Report 1911, private collection of Benjamin Beck.

<sup>225</sup> Many examples could be drawn. One, at Newcastle, The Poor Children's Holiday Association, initially formed to give working-class children in the city a holiday at the seaside once a year (though its scope widened over the years) had an active committee of over seventy women in 1895. There were of course many such charitable bodies across the region with similar numbers of active members.

dominance of liberal politics in the region, ample press coverage, and the exertions made by Elizabeth Spence Watson on Tyneside (and Lady Fry, who had founded the WLF, in South Durham) these figures might well have been privately viewed as disappointing.<sup>226</sup> In the early years of this WLA new members were sought out through novel advertising; on one occasion a donkey cart being hired to carry notices of the association while 'the little donkey, innocent of any political bias, perambulated the streets of the town!'<sup>227</sup> Elizabeth helped to form further WLAs in areas of Northumberland and Durham although only her brief accounts of doing so remain. Her activities 'outside' were curtailed when her children were young, but she was a frequent speaker at national WLA meetings as well at meetings relating directly to women's suffrage.<sup>228</sup> Whilst there were some attempts to rival the entertainments on offer by the Primrose League – the Wansbeck WLA hosting picnics at Wallington Hall with the Trevelyanas as well as the more typical soirees and sewing meetings,<sup>229</sup> – there remained an onus upon educating its members. 'Primrose Leagueism, with its thoughts constantly fixed on party electioneering devices and results' may from the liberal point of view have been 'a narrow and odious thing', it did not demand as much from its membership as did the WLA: 'the work and aims of the Women's Liberal Associations ... are essentially different. In the first place ... they are educational. They seek the creation of an intelligent interest in the public life of the country.'<sup>230</sup> The Newcastle and Gateshead WLA held lectures and debates on issues such as women's suffrage, Home Rule for Ireland, Poor Law reform,

<sup>226</sup> See, Pugh, *The March of the Women*, Table 6.1, p. 133. Around 10% of the membership at Newcastle and Gateshead in 1892 held a position on the WLA.

<sup>227</sup> Watson, Newcastle WLA.

<sup>228</sup> Elizabeth Spence Watson, 'Family Chronicles', in private possession of Benjamin Beck. For example, she was requested to speak at a meeting in London by Emily Davis, NRL SW/14/4, Emily Davis to Elizabeth Spence Watson, 5 May 1892.

<sup>229</sup> NRO, 5553, Notebook of Sir George Otto Trevelyan.

<sup>230</sup> *The North Eastern Daily Gazette*, 21 February 1890.



land reform, education, extension of local government, parish councils, peace, temperance 'in its various aspects, legislative, moral, and educational', anti-state regulation of vice, 'and many others', whilst at annual meetings local MPs, such as John Morley, joined them to speak in length on Liberal issues.<sup>231</sup>

There seemed little room, or time, for members of the working classes to take up 'the opportunities for and calls to service that press upon intelligent and sympathetic women who have leisure for work outside of their own families and home circles.'<sup>232</sup> Canvassing work seems to have been undertaken by only a handful of interested women, predominantly middle-class committee members. By 1911 the Newcastle and Gateshead WLA despite continued efforts at increasing participation were grieved to record that 'members have dwindled and the interest in its work has waned'. Membership had fallen to 140, increasing the burden of organisation on those remaining, around one in five members holding a position on the WLA.<sup>233</sup> Optimistically it was thought that 'so much progress has been made in the matters discussed that there scarcely seems to be the *need* for a Women's Liberal Association – while Suffrage Societies have multiplied indefinitely and affected our Women's Liberal Association.' The preponderance of national suffrage associations may well have limited the appeal of the WLA by the early twentieth century, but it also seems likely that the potential members who would once have comprised the small nucleus of active participants increasingly found themselves engaged in the areas of education and employment that were opening up for middle-class women at this time and simply would not have had the time to dedicate themselves to the

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<sup>231</sup> Watson, 'Newcastle WLA'. In 1887 Elizabeth Spence Watson gave a paper on reforms passed since 1832, which was subsequently printed as a 22 page booklet.

<sup>232</sup> *The North Eastern Daily Gazette*, 21 February 1890.

<sup>233</sup> 'Annual Report of the Newcastle WLA for 1911', in the private possession of Benjamin Beck.

WLA. There were also competing leisure activities, especially the increased number of 'concerts and amusements of all sorts [which] have taken up the time and interest of members, especially of the younger ones.'<sup>234</sup>

Amongst working-class women, for whom the appeal was never as great, the WLA struggled to attract members. In both the WLA and the Primrose League active members in each locality tended to be predominantly of the middle-classes, acting in small numbers over long periods of service.<sup>235</sup> The Primrose League was able to attract a wider membership because its appeal was not necessarily political. Although the number of women who took part in canvassing and other explicitly political activities was small in comparison to the membership, the League appealed because its political messages were broad and an effort was made to make them easy to understand through pithy leaflets. As the Darlington WLA pointed out the 'family advantage of women "dabbling" in politics' remained a moot question and although they argued that a 'rational interest in national affairs was better than much of the gossip on less profitable subjects', both men and women of the working-classes seem to have found the appeal of the indistinct patriotic and religious values espoused by the Primrose League, supplemented by its lavish social occasions, the more appealing.<sup>236</sup> The difficulty of appealing to working-class women on specific political programmes is most clearly revealed in the work of the Women's Labour League.

### *The Women's Labour League*

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<sup>234</sup> Watson, 'Newcastle WLA'.

<sup>235</sup> The remaining records where the address of committee members are recorded certainly suggest an affluent active membership. The Newcastle WLA report of 1911 records the address of every member the overwhelmingly majority of whom lived in the middle-class suburbs of Tyneside.

<sup>236</sup> *Northern Review*, 25 February 1888.

The Independent Labour Party had a national paying membership of approximately 30,000 in 1912, around 10% of which were likely to have been women.<sup>237</sup> Modest support in comparison to that which the Conservative and Liberals enjoyed, the ILP was nevertheless the largest party in British socialist politics at this time, although it never had more than 2,000 members in the North East, the second lowest regional membership. This was despite there being a staunch group of dedicated individuals active in the region.<sup>238</sup> Whilst the ILP welcomed women at the level of local branches, it did not prioritise gender issues until after 1914 and put forward contradictory messages about the role of women within the party and society as a whole.<sup>239</sup> The Women's Labour League was formed in 1906 with the aim of involving women in Labour politics and improving the working and family lives of working-class women. The active membership tended to be lower-middle-class, although there were also women from wealthy backgrounds, such as Ruth Dodds at Gateshead and Marion Coates Hansen at Middlesbrough.<sup>240</sup> As in the

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<sup>237</sup> June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women. Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>238</sup> Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East', p. 21-22.

<sup>239</sup> See, June Hannam, 'Women and the ILP, 1890-1914', in James, Jowitt and Laybourn (eds.), *Centennial History of the ILP*, p. 214; June Hannam, '"In the Comradeship of the Sexes Lies the Hope of Progress and Social Regeneration": Women in the West Riding ILP, c. 1890-1914', in Rendall, *Equal or Different*, p. 214-38; and, Laura Ugolini, '"We Must Stand by our Bairns": ILP Men and Suffrage Militancy, 1905-1914', *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), pp. 149-169. For the view of the emancipation of women and of workers as separate causes in the Labour movement see, Laura Ugolini, '"By All Means Let the Ladies Have a Chance". The *Workmen's Times*, Independent Labour Representation and Women's Suffrage, 1891-4', in Angela V. John and Claire Eustance (eds.), *The Men's Share? Masculinities, Male Support and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1890-1920* (London, 1997), pp. 62-87.

<sup>240</sup> Maureen Callcott, '"A Pilgrimage of Grace: The Diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905-1974' (Whitley Bay, 1995); Hansen was the election agent for George Lansbury in 1906 at Middlesbrough and persuaded him to include 'votes for women' in his election manifesto. He later claimed in a letter to her that she 'educated' him on 'the women's question'; quoted in, John Shepherd, 'A Life on the Left: George Lansbury: A Case Study in Recent Labour Biography', *Labour History*, 87 (2004), pp. 147-166.

WLA and Primrose League some members of the WLL were voted onto their Board of Guardians.<sup>241</sup>

One of the most important organisers of the WLL in the North East at this time was Lisbeth Simm. Her husband had been appointed as area organiser to the Durham coalfield for the ILP in 1905. The ILP had experienced only limited growth here during the 1890s. Jack Lawson recalled that at this time 'the ILP was little more than a rumour amongst us'.<sup>242</sup> The appointment of Simm was followed by a 'mushroom growth of branches'.<sup>243</sup> Simm was active in the WLL from 1908 and also wrote a column for women in the *Northern Democrat*, a Labour newspaper edited by her husband.<sup>244</sup> Simm worked in the towns of the region as well as in the colliery villages her husband had visited. The determined work of Lisbeth was rewarded with a growth in branch numbers, but this does not tell the whole story. Her correspondence to Mary Middleton, national secretary of the WLL, reveals deep frustration and disappointment at the lack of success the organisation experienced in the region although her resolve to push forward with her work remained indefatigable.

Branches of the WLL were formed at Newcastle, Jarrow,<sup>245</sup> Darlington, Stanhope, Shildon, Crook and other colliery villages, although some branches failed to take off as their formation coincided with male strike action, as in Wallsend and Hebburn during

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<sup>241</sup> Four WLL members in the North East were elected Guardians in 1913; *The League Leaflet. Being a Paper to Interest and to Help Members of the Women's Labour League*, May 1913.

<sup>242</sup> Lawson, *A Man's Life*, p. 37. See also David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 42-51.

<sup>243</sup> Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East', p. 22.

<sup>244</sup> On the tireless, and influential, work of Lisbeth Simm see Collette, *For Labour and For Women*, pp. 78-85.

<sup>245</sup> The Jarrow branch was formed by Marian Curran, who called the Labour Party the 'men's party'. Wife of the MP for Jarrow, Marian was more prominent in national than local work and was elected to the executive committee of the WLL in 1908. See Christine Collette, 'Curran, Marian (fl. 1890-1910)' *ODNB* (Oxford 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53244>, accessed 27 April 2006].

1908.<sup>246</sup> Membership numbers at these branches were not large and problems were experienced due to insufficient funds. Simm worried that 'even in Newcastle – the largest branch – the proportion of women members is very, very small.'<sup>247</sup> In 1912 there were twenty-four members at Stanhope, whilst at Newcastle the membership had risen to thirty-four, up from twenty-five in the previous year.<sup>248</sup> The conference of North East branches Simms held at her house in Gosforth during 1908 attracted an attendance of fourteen women. This small attendance did not stop a great deal of organisation work being resolved on, such as the distribution of leaflets at the Miner's Gala, and there seems to have been a cheerful sense of camaraderie at the meeting, a red flag being fixed on a garden rake and hoisted in honour of the assembly by Lisbeth's husband.<sup>249</sup> Not all men were as supportive, and despite her husband's prominent position it took some convincing before the WLL was allowed to use the ILP rooms free of charge at Gateshead and Newcastle.<sup>250</sup>

June Hannam and Karen Hunt have argued that 'although this was not a politics which swept up huge numbers of people, women were as likely to respond to its initial appeal, if (and this was a large if) they came into contact with socialist propaganda.'<sup>251</sup> Simm complained the ILP was 'so new in the outlying districts that the *men* have hardly

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<sup>246</sup> Labour History Archive, John Rylands Library (hereafter LHA), WLL/90, Report by L.E. Simm, September 1908; *The League Leaflet*, 1911-1913; *The Woman Worker*, 1907-08. Collette, *For Labour and For Women*, p. 61, lists twenty one Women's Labour Leagues in the region, although it should be mentioned that this number of branches was not necessarily a strength. As Mr Simm found with the ILP such a spread of branches across the region served to spread the membership very thinly.

<sup>247</sup> LHA, WLL/92, L.E. Simms to Mary Middleton, 11 November 1908.

<sup>248</sup> *The League Leaflet*, February 1913.

<sup>249</sup> *The Woman Worker*, 26 June 1908.

<sup>250</sup> LHA, WLL/82, L.E. Simms to Mrs MacDonald, 14 June 1908. On balance however there seems little evidence to support Pugh's contention the WLL 'encountered marked antagonism from workingmen in the region', or to suppose that indifference or hostility to the WLL was not also evident in their response to the ILP. See Pugh, *March of the Women*, p. 239.

<sup>251</sup> Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, pp. 4-5.

begun to think it stands for women also, much less the women.<sup>252</sup> Most of the propaganda and literature encountered by women here was vague and not relevant to their everyday lives. At Middlesbrough the ILP published a newssheet prior to the 1906 election stating that Lansbury and the ILP stood for

making women citizens – we stand for Reform in Housing Laws to give mothers and children a chance to live. We stand for regular work and fair wages, so that children don't starve and the women fret their lives away striving to make both ends meet on nothing a week coming in, and so we call for the help of the women. Mothers come out on Tuesday, send your husbands to the poll, give them no rest till they have Voted, and Voted straight for Labour and Lansbury! and then pass the word round the street that Lansbury stands for the uplifting of women'.<sup>253</sup>

It is unclear from appeals such as this what the ILP offered women that was distinct from their commitment to improving the condition of the male working-classes – and which party it might be asked stood against regular work and fair wages? – or how the 'uplifting of women' would directly benefit them. Simm fared little better with WLL literature and arguments. It was 'slow, slow work rousing women', but although it was an '*awful task* trying to rouse some of the women', Simm thought it 'more awful that they should be left as they are'.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> LHA, WLL/92.

<sup>253</sup> Teeside Archives, U/PAT 6/4, 'The Middlesbrough Election News', 13 January 1906.

<sup>254</sup> LHA WLL/90.

The perception in the colliery districts, isolated from urban areas and dominated by union politics, was that WLL work was only for town women. The attempt to interest women was made more difficult in the tight-knit mining areas: 'where everyone knows everyone else & all their affairs, it is most difficult to get anyone to move.' The small number of members, only six at Throckley, also meant that those who joined would often have to be extremely dedicated as attending meetings might necessitate a walk to a branch some distance from their village. Success in the colliery districts was described as an 'uphill fight'.<sup>255</sup> In the urban areas where ILP branches were more firmly supported there were difficulties in persuading women already active in the ILP, most often in fundraising through bazaars and other meetings, to join the WLL. Some ILP men spoke of being unable to 'win over their own wives' who were prejudiced against socialism and hoped WLL work would change their opinion, although Simm 'found some of the old trade unionists afraid we should spoil their homes by taking women out to meetings!!!'<sup>256</sup> Accordingly, it was not the question of female employment but that of 'women's place in the home' that Simm addressed as the biggest issue in the region: 'the women have heard it so often that they believe it now.'<sup>257</sup>

The WLL was quick to blame a lack of resources on the lacklustre response to their appeals from working-class women but the issue of its appeal went beyond being able to afford teas and entertainment to entice the women with 'something to turn out for'.<sup>258</sup> Nationally distributed leaflets were handed out by the WLL in conjunction with copies of *The Woman Worker*. The arguments presented here must have seemed fairly

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<sup>255</sup> LHA WLL/90; WLL/93.

<sup>256</sup> LHA WLL/93.

<sup>257</sup> LHA WLL/81, L.E. Simms to Mary Middleton, 11 June 1908.

<sup>258</sup> LHA WLL/92.

abstract and pointless to working-class women in the colliery districts. The self-declared aim and purpose of *The Woman Worker* was to present a 'picture of the many activities of women Trade Unionists', and it concentrated upon issues of factory work and working conditions alien to the overwhelming majority of working-class women in the North East. Promises to attend to improving the material conditions of colliery villages would have met not so much with incredulous silence but rather bemusement. Whilst those outside colliery villages were quick to condemn the living conditions of miners and their families those who lived in them did their best to make them comfortable and clean. The colliery rows were part of the culture of the villages, generations of mining families having lived in similar conditions. Above all there was no expectation that change would come, nor that it was needed, given the small improvements that had occurred from the 1870s onwards and especially after the formation of Urban District Councils in 1894. Whilst the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* bemoaned, in 1873, the inadequate housing provisions in mining villages, the 10,000 attendees at the Ninth Annual Picnic and Gala of the Miners Mutual Confident Association were passing a resolution expressing their satisfaction and appreciation of the housing improvements that had occurred in the previous year.<sup>259</sup> Although the WLL could point to their active lobbying of the City Councils on the issues of school meals, the care of infants and unemployment, as evidence of their work in improving the lives of working-class women, it only served to reinforce the perception of the WLL as an organization for urban women. Progress on such issues was often slow and frustrating and may have served to highlight the limited capabilities of the WLL in these urban areas, even if they were eventually successful.

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<sup>259</sup> Alan Metcalfe, *Leisure and Recreation in a Victorian Mining Community: The Social Economy of Leisure in North-East England, 1820-1914* (London, 2006), p. 15.



Simm commented after leading a deputation of women to the City Council that she was 'about heartsick of all public affairs .... They gave us a good hearing & promised to consider our suggestions; but are we are nearer? Everything seems hopeless.'<sup>260</sup>

Purdue has argued that 'whether the feminist influence of women members brought to the party did it much good in gaining votes from the male working-class electorate of the Edwardian North East may be doubted.'<sup>261</sup> This is a fairly limited view of the aims of the WLL, although with a membership in the very low hundreds it is indeed debatable how much impact they had on male voters even if this could be measured. The failure of the WLL in the North East was, despite its dedicated core of workers, its inability to make the organisation relevant to the lives of working-class women. Simm touches upon addressing the issue of 'women in the home' but seems to have fallen back upon leaflets and newspapers that were centrally produced and dealt with issues that failed to resonate with working-class women. There was not only the 'frustrations of a politics which focused so much on the future and so little on the means to achieve it,' but the frustration that it took a form unlikely to have a wide appeal in the region.<sup>262</sup> If for working-class women 'politicisation began in the workplace and in the experience of organising around it,' the women in this region were at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>263</sup> However, this view of politicisation takes only a narrow view of politics. The movements described in the previous section had clear goals, aims that were thought to be achievable in the short term, and were easily understood. Working-class women could be roused to political action and towards the end of this period could

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<sup>260</sup> LHA, WLL/92.

<sup>261</sup> Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East', p. 23.

<sup>262</sup> Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist-Women*, p. 5.

<sup>263</sup> Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1978), p. 125.

find organisations with political overtones appealing. Whilst the aims of the WLL could be understood by working-class women it seems that they were not thought to be relevant to their lives. Nationally by the end of this period the WLL was able to reach out to the very poorest women in society, but locally it was less successful. The WLA, and especially the Primrose League, found some support amongst women in the colliery districts because they functioned more as social outlets for these areas where the environment was 'most depressing'.<sup>264</sup> Unlike the WLL, the WLA and Primrose League seem not to have attempted any 'educational work' amongst colliery women.<sup>265</sup>

### *The Working Class and Women's Suffrage*

The place of women within politics in this latter period was dominated by the issue of votes for women. Some members of the WLL as well as the WLA and Primrose League withdrew from those organisations to dedicate more time to the issue of winning the vote for women.<sup>266</sup> This was a trend that was reinforced after members of the Women's Social and Political Union, who had grown impatient with the lack of commitment to the suffrage campaign within the labour movement, carried out propaganda against both the

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<sup>264</sup> *The Woman Worker*, 28 Aug 1908. Men and women in these areas were however 'used to it' and suggestions that their houses and facilities could be improved might at best have been thought of as unlikely, given the conditions elsewhere and the control of housing by coal owners, and at worst a case of meddling from an outsider.

<sup>265</sup> LHA, WLL/92.

<sup>266</sup> The Newcastle Women's Suffrage Society and District, founded in 1900, did however have an executive committee on which active members of the WLA and Primrose League, and later the WLL, were prominent. Tensions in the society over the issue of whether to support the Liberal or Labour candidate at a by-election led to a split and the formation of a Newcastle WSPU in July 1908. For recent research on suffrage see the articles in the special issue on 'The Suffragette and Women's History', *Women's History Review*, 14 (2005).

Liberal and Labour candidate standing at the 1906 by-election at Cockermouth.<sup>267</sup> Some WLL members, whilst in favour of women's suffrage, seem also to have grown frustrated at the dominance of suffrage societies and their ability to raise money: 'it is certainly not from or *for* the class the WLL is working to help.'<sup>268</sup> Although many members of Suffrage societies were eager to have the vote so that they could improve the lives of working-class women, and there were dedicated working-class campaigners who risked imprisonment for the cause,<sup>269</sup> it is hard to escape the conclusion that the burgeoning feminist culture that grew up during the Edwardian period, ripe with possibilities, was a predominantly middle-class movement.<sup>270</sup> Esther Roper, who organized the first suffrage campaigns directed specifically at women workers, remarked in private during 1906, that her working-class friends were less willing to attend public demonstrations lest they be

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<sup>267</sup> Hamman, 'Women and the ILP', p. 221. Whilst Krista Cowman has convincingly argued that the position of the Cockermouth incident in suffrage history as the site of an irrevocable split between the ILP and WSPU has been overplayed, her comment that it may be viewed as 'prompting little more than the resignation of two women from the party' is surely too glib a take on matters. The Cockermouth incident led to local ILP branches re-evaluating their relations with the WSPU, prompting heated debate and resignations. The Middlesbrough ILP for example voted down amendments both in favour and against the actions of the WSPU at Cockermouth, although many abstained from voting, leading the organising secretary to resign her post; Teeside Archives, U/ILP/2 'ILP Minutes', 17 August, 10 September, 8 October 1906; Krista Cowman, "'Incipient Toryism'? The Women's Social and Political Union and the Independent Labour Party, 1903-14', *History Workshop Journal*, 53 (2002), p. 137-39.

<sup>268</sup> LHA, WLL/84 'L.E. Simm to Mary Middleton', 28 June 1908. In a later letter Simm complained of the attendance charge levied at Mrs Pankhurst's meeting at Newcastle Town Hall and wished she had her shilling back. There was some envy that they had a 'great crowd ... And we have to be content when we get a dozen women to join our branches, often! (Never mind raising funds!)'; LHA, WLL/89, 'L.E. Simm to Mary Middleton', 15 September 1908.

<sup>269</sup> See for example, J. Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper, 1864-1946* (London, 1984); Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Silk Dresses and Lavender Kid Gloves: The Wayward Career of Jessie Craigen, Working Suffragist', *Women's History Review*, 5 (1996), pp. 129-150; and, June Purvis, 'The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian England', *Women's History Review*, 1 (1995), pp. 103-33.

<sup>270</sup> For the subversive nature of the movement, especially the WSPU, see, Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford, 1990); and, Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London, 1985). For a narrower account of the campaign and the tactics employed by militants and non-militants see, Pugh, *March of the Women*.

'mixed up with and held accountable as a class for educated and upper-class women who kick, shriek, bite and spit.'<sup>271</sup>

David Neville has made some bold claims as to the importance of the suffrage movement in the North East. Although he concedes that the movement did not spur 'vast numbers of women' into involvement in suffrage activities he argues that the region was at the forefront of militant activity and that 'on many fronts North East women were at the fore. In contrast to the prevailing impression, the socio-economic condition of the North East proved no brake to activity in comparison to other potentially more promising areas of the country.' Neville further contends that the North East was typified by especially strong links between the suffrage movement, the Labour movement, and the working-classes in general.<sup>272</sup> There are a number of problems with Neville's analysis. Whilst there were a small number of regional women prominent in the movement they were middle-class, well-educated, well-connected and mobile; the economic climate of the North East in this period had less of a negative impact upon them and in fact opportunities were opening up for precisely this group of women. It is worth considering the extent to which a suffragette such as Charlotte Marsh, born in Alnmouth, educated in Newcastle, Wrexham, and then Bordeaux, who trained in London as a sanitary inspector and was later a regional organizer for the WSPU, especially in Nottingham and Portsmouth, can be considered as coming under the influence of the socio-economic climate of the North East.<sup>273</sup> Neville's claims that there was a united effort between the

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<sup>271</sup> Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p. 56; Margaret M. Jensen, 'Roper, Esther Gertrude (1868–1938)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50081>, accessed 28 April 2006].

<sup>272</sup> David Neville, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in the North East of England, 1900–1914', Ph.D. thesis, (University of Northumbria, 1991), p. 163; David Neville, *To Make Their Mark: The Women's Suffrage Movement in the North East of England, 1900–1914* (Newcastle, 1997).

<sup>273</sup> 'Obituary', *The Times*, 24 April 1961; Michelle Myhal, 'Marsh, Charlotte Augusta Leopoldine (1887–1961)', *ODNB* [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/56243>, accessed 27 April 2006].

suffrage and Labour movements are also tenuous at best. As discussed above, the WLL experienced difficulty in rousing working-class women, whilst the suffrage demonstrations in the region were typified by hostile audiences of working-class men. At a meeting in the Bigg Market, Newcastle, Mrs Pankhurst and other speakers were met with a 'good humoured but boisterous crowd of men and lads ... few women appeared in the throng.' The crowd clearly had little interest in the issue of suffrage, who 'bantered and chaffed' the speakers as they made their way to the platform. When Mrs Pankhurst addressed the crowd as to whether they thought 'women who pay taxes like a man should have the vote like a man', she was met with cries of 'No'. The meeting broke up in disorder and the speakers required a police escort. Smaller meetings were held in the weeks following the Bigg Market meeting with little success. Mrs Fraser of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies addressed Elswick engineers in their clubroom; but the issues at this election were those of employment, education, tariffs and licensing laws, and some hostility was expressed over the prominence she thought women's suffrage deserved.<sup>274</sup> At a meeting in 1909, a few days before she was arrested for throwing a stone at the car of Lloyd George (who was speaking at a Liberal gathering in Newcastle), Lady Constance Lytton recalled selling copies of *Votes for Women* in a crowd of working-class men whom Christabel Pankhurst was addressing: 'the crowd, though a large one, was mostly comprised of out-of-work men who took little interest in what was said.'<sup>275</sup> The response of ILP men to suffrage and the WLL was mixed, but perhaps the most pertinent evidence one can lay against Neville's claims is the split of the Newcastle

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<sup>274</sup> *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 8, 10, 21 September 1908.

<sup>275</sup> Lady Constance Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences* (London, 1914), pp. 203-13.

Women's Suffrage Society on the issue of whether to support the Liberal or Labour candidate.<sup>276</sup>

This is not to say that there was not backing for women's suffrage and the press remained supportive for the cause in general. The Ladies Column of the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* commented dismissively on the anti-suffrage element, a stance mirrored in the other regional newspapers:

Ladies who are magazine readers must have seen recently in the pages of the *National Review* a protest signed by ladies bearing well-known names against the demand by women householders who are ratepayers to be allowed to exercise the parliamentary franchise. With a few exceptions, the ladies who signed the protest derive their importance solely from the names conferred upon them before the altar. A man can give his name to a woman, and even endow her with all his worldly goods, but he can by no means supply her either with brains, common-sense, or a fair estimate of her own position. It would be uncourteous to drag forward the domestic history of the ladies who believe that the exercise of the franchise would do harm to the nation, but taken as a whole they represent a class of unintellectual women who are ciphers in themselves and merely appendages to clever husbands.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Pugh claims there was a 'marked antagonism' between the WLL and workingmen but this is not evident to any great extent in the letters of Simm discussed above; Pugh, *March of the Women*, p. 239.

<sup>277</sup> TWAS, DX 1116/1/3, Newspaper Cuttings Scrapbook, 1891-1900.

Historians have sometimes been too quick to replicate such criticism of anti-suffrage women and their position was certainly not as one dimensional as has often been suggested.<sup>278</sup> Although there was support for female suffrage in the region, it is also the case that it was low on the political agenda. It is no coincidence that the most successful political organisation in this period, the Primrose League, was that with the least defined objectives and whose presentation was the least political. Political involvement tended to necessitate a mixture of the understandable and the expected. A Conservative canvasser in the 1880s repeatedly found the electorate in his constituency to express surprise when he informed them that the Liberals were in government. They had thought that 'because their own member was a Conservative, that the Conservatives had been in office all that time.' As Hoppen rightly adds, 'electors of this kind responded best to appeals comprehensible within their own immediate experiences.'<sup>279</sup> The movements and protests described in the previous section were often able to appeal because they were understandable, achievable, and easy to access. Although the suffrage movement could be described as one which sought to defend the community of women, this took a leap in imagination that did not chime with the day-to-day experiences of working-class women in the region.<sup>280</sup> The political organisations described above, whilst involving working-class women in contemporary political debate, were generally unsuccessful at appealing to working-class women (and men) directly on political issues of substance. Even the election campaigns, as *The Times* commented, could be hit and miss in this respect as

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<sup>278</sup> An important recent contribution to our understanding of the position of prominent anti-suffrage women has been provided by Lucy Delap, 'Feminist and Anti-Feminist Encounters in Edwardian Britain', *Historical Research*, 78 (2005), pp. 377-99.

<sup>279</sup> Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, p. 256.

<sup>280</sup> On women's 'friendships' within their communities being predominantly close female kin rather than merely female neighbours in the period just beyond this study see, Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), pp.179-88.

often no discrimination was shown 'as to the kind of literature distributed, and appeals which might influence artisans are made to agricultural labourers and vice versa.'<sup>281</sup> Electoral politics nevertheless remained a central feature of working-class culture, as the following section will explore.

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## WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND ELECTIONS

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Recent studies of women and their role at elections have overwhelmingly focused on the activities of elite women over the later part of the long eighteenth century.<sup>282</sup> These studies, like those examining the electioneering roles of women in the WLA, Primrose League, and WLL, concentrate on the activities of a small number of influential and committed women. There is though much to be said on the popular participation of working-class women at election times throughout the nineteenth century.

The increasingly respectable electorate from 1832 went some way towards quelling the festivity of elections with bands and church bell chimes becoming less prominent in proceedings, the more carnivalesque aspects slowly falling out of favour. Some of this can be traced to the Election Expenses Regulation Act of 1827 which banned 'marks of distinction' for six months either side of an election. A relief no doubt to the purse of agents such as that at Norwich who in 1784 distributed over 7,000

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<sup>281</sup> *The Times*, 30 January 1911, quoted in Neal Blewett, *The Peers, The Parties and the People. The General Election of 1910* (London, 1972), p. 134.

<sup>282</sup> A. Rauser, 'The Butcher-Kissing Duchess of Devonshire: Between Caricature and Allegory in 1784', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 36 (2002), pp. 23-46; Renata Lana, 'Women and the Foxite Strategy in the Westminster Election of 1784', *Eighteenth Century Life*, 26 (2002), pp. 46-69; Elaine Chalus, "'To Serve My Friends': Women and Political Patronage in Eighteenth-Century England", in Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*, pp. 57-88; Judith Lewis, '1784 and All That: Aristocratic Women and Electoral Politics', in Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*; Chalus, "'That epidemical madness'"; and, Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life*. A notable exception and influence upon the following section is Matthew Cragoe, "'Jenny Rules the Roost': Women and Electoral Politics, 1832-68", in Gleadle and Richardson, *Women in British Politics*, pp. 153-68.



cockades to an electorate of just over 3,000, but it came at the expense of the visibility of non-electors during election campaigns, many of whom were women. There are signs that this act was mostly resisted and many election reports continued to reference the number of women wearing colours.<sup>283</sup> During the 1832 election campaign in Northumberland the 'young ladies' wore 'red ribbons and mean to do so, as long as the spirit of Election remains, which it is likely to do for some time.'<sup>284</sup> Whilst some of the ceremony that typified eighteenth century elections fell into decline, elections remained until the 1870s a social and civic occasion. Communities could be inundated with handbills from candidates (at least 200 election publications were published during the 1826 election in Northumberland,<sup>285</sup>) some of which would give daily and even hourly updates as to the state of the polls. Under the reformed system the number of contested elections rose dramatically, only the Morpeth seat remaining uncontested in the region before 1867, increasing the number of opportunities for electors to cast their ballot whilst maintaining communal interest.<sup>286</sup> The *Newcastle Chronicle* commented on the disruptive nature of contested elections and regarded them to be a 'very serious evil, for it would suspend all business, create riot, and for the most part end in distress.'<sup>287</sup> The report of nominations at Northumberland during 1774 focused on the enthusiastic crowds who filled the town hall. The observation that 'those in the greatest hurry to get in

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<sup>283</sup> TWAS, DX 413/1/80, 'Speech of Hodgson, 20 July 1830'.

<sup>284</sup> NRO, 1100/24, Mrs Fenwick to Mary Tate, October, n.d. (1832). See further, Frank O'Gorman, 'Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780-1860', *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), p. 95; and, Judith S. Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism. Gender, Class, and Politics in Late Georgian Britain* (London, 2003), p. 60.

<sup>285</sup> NRO, 3085, 'Scrapbook of Posters, Handbills and Cuttings related to the 1826 Northumberland Election'; David Stoker, 'Elections and Voting Behaviour: A Study of Elections in Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland', Ph.D. thesis (University of Manchester, 1980), p. 134. The Northumberland election of 1826 was particularly bitter, culminating in a duel between two candidates.

<sup>286</sup> Edwin Jaggard, 'Small Town Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain', *History*, 89 (2004), p. 15.

<sup>287</sup> *Newcastle Chronicle*, 7 August 1830, quoted in Peter Brett, 'The Liberal Middle Classes and Politics in Three Provincial Towns – Newcastle, Bristol, and York – c.1812-1841', Ph.D. thesis (University of Durham, 1991), p. 8.

seemed to have the least business there', would stand true for much of this period.<sup>288</sup> At the result of the poll at Tynemouth in 1865 it was clear from

an early hour in the morning ... that the free and independent electors, and even the non-electors, of the borough of Tynemouth were determined that the day should not pass without some demonstrations on their part. By eleven o'clock in the forenoon scarcely a shop in the borough was open for the transaction of business, and as the day drew on every place of business was closed, and the town bore quite a holiday aspect .... the crowd was so hilarious, and good tempered, and bent upon a spree, that the smallest pretext for a demonstration was seized with avidity and made the most of.<sup>289</sup>

Jon Lawrence has suggested that by the Edwardian period the undercurrents of violence that accompanied political meetings ensured that even if women were not formally excluded, the 'bear-pit of partisan masculinity' that comprised the main body of the crowds resulted in an almost exclusively male audience.<sup>290</sup> There is a lot to be said for this argument. Elizabeth Spence Watson described the declaration of the poll at Newcastle in 1885 as she watched from a nearby building: 'The long waiting was tedious,

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<sup>288</sup> T. Slack, *The Poll at the Election of Knights* (Newcastle, 1774).

<sup>289</sup> NRL, WCT 28, 'Miscellaneous Press Cuttings, 1865-68'. The accounts of the speech given by the elected candidate, Trevelyan, differ as to his thanks to the ladies 'at the windows'. One newspaper quotes him as attributing one third of the votes he received to their efforts, whilst another quotes him as saying 3%. In the article that quotes the higher figure it has been crossed and replaced by 3%, presumably by Trevelyan. It is interesting that the first reporter may have thought the efforts of these ladies could have been so successful. However, if the lower figure is correct, 3% is too precise a figure to have been estimated and suggests an accurate record was kept of their canvassing activities.

<sup>290</sup> Lawrence, 'Contesting the Male Polity', p. 203.

and as carts with difficulty passed through the crowd, the people seized on a barrel of apples – soon forced it open, sent the apples flying hither and thither, chucked the barrel about on the tips of innumerable hands, and, worse still, got hold of some passing coke and flung it far and near to the great danger of broken heads or eyes put out. However no serious injury occurred'.<sup>291</sup> Mounted police appeared, 'but they seemed to consider it play and made no effort to stop it.'<sup>292</sup> Rowdy and boisterous crowds were not the exclusive preserve of polling declarations either. Joseph Cowen was due to speak at a Liberal meeting in 1880, but:

the crowds were so tremendous that poor Mr Cowen was choked in going in, fainted away, and had to be with great difficulty carried out to go home. Meanwhile the vast crowd inside the building waved and surged about – some of the people climbing over the railings to the side elevations .... It was a fearful scene and really rather alarming ... [Robert Spence Watson] got a good deal crushed and has very sore sides this morn and he looked so pale and ill on the platform that I was quite anxious about him.<sup>293</sup>

Cowen suffered internal injuries that were to effect him the rest of his life and he retired at the following election.<sup>294</sup> Violence was not always accidental or playful, as was the case when Robert Spence Watson attended a Tory meeting held to attack Gladstone and

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<sup>291</sup> Watson, 'Family Chronicles'.

<sup>292</sup> TWAS, ACC 213/232, Letter, Elizabeth Spence Watson to Mabel Spence Watson, 30 November 1885.

<sup>293</sup> TWAS, ACC 213/79, Letter, ESW to MSW, 20 March 1880.

<sup>294</sup> W. F. Rae, 'Cowen, Joseph (1829–1900)', rev. Eugenio F. Biagini, *ODNB* [<http://oxforddnd.com/view/article/6494>, accessed 3 May 2006].

carried the meeting in his favour: 'The Tories seized me and tried to throw me over some railings into a deep hole, and battered me all over so that I became unconscious, and I have been in the Doctor's hands since .... I carried my point – such cowardly and disgraceful conduct only brings discredit on those who indulge in it.'<sup>295</sup>

One should be careful though as to how far this argument is taken. The playful behaviour of crowds at elections stretches back further than the Edwardian period and here too they often resulted in violence or injury. It was common for newspaper reports to mention 'ladies' at windows waving to candidates during meetings, although these women were more often than not amongst the local social elite and related to those involved at the poll, Elizabeth Spence Watson being a case in point. It was much less common for reports to mention the working-class women who were present in the crowds at political meetings, unless there was an accident or incident, as the account of the arrival of Mr Bell into Newcastle during 1826 demonstrates. It was reported that 'the windows of the houses in Northumberland and Pilgrim Street were thronged with ladies, and a most immense crowd collected in the same streets; especially in front of the George Inn. We have seldom witnessed a greater crowd, but it certainly was not of the most respectable description.' This is a fairly typical description of the audience at such meetings and no doubt would have revealed little more of the composition of this crowd were it not for the chaos that accompanied Bell's procession as his carriage reached the George Inn where 'the crushing here became truly awful, and the screams of the agonized crowd, and their unheeded cries of 'move on' soon drowned all cheering .... Mr Bell soon entered the inn, and the crowd slowly dispersed. We regret to add that several persons,

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<sup>295</sup> TWAS, ACC 213/98, RSW to MSW, 16 October 1880.

chiefly women, were hurt .... Several females fainted.<sup>296</sup> Howick, after his 1841 by-election success at Sunderland, paraded through the town and was met by a mob and a volley of stones. One member of the mob fired a gun loaded with paper pellets, causing much alarm amongst the crowd and some injury: the thigh of Jane Coward was broken, although Howick subsequently met the three guinea cost of setting the bone.<sup>297</sup> Female participation in the crowds and violence evident at elections was far from unusual or unique to this region; at Blackburn in 1868 it was reported that the day before municipal elections rival mobs fought in the streets and 'a cart of stones was kept in readiness by the blue and orange party, and a crowd of women kept supplying them with missiles.'<sup>298</sup>

Lawrence's argument about the increasingly male environments of political meetings by the later Victorian and Edwardian period is certainly true but this would seem less to do with the threat of rowdy behaviour or violence and more to do with the organisation of this misconduct. The breaking up of rival meetings, battles over the control of symbolic public spaces, hiring brass bands to disrupt speeches and roughing up opponents were nothing new and in fact constitute some of the elements that it was hoped would be brought under control by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883. The increased organisation and control exerted by political bodies from the 1870s did not, as Lawrence has brilliantly discussed, transform the basic nature of popular politics, but it did have an impact upon women's place in electoral politics. Party politics, although limited in controlling and shaping popular politics, worked within a new context once the effect of the Ballot Act of 1872 had fully impacted. The Ballot Act was introduced to allow for the enfranchised to vote in secrecy, although there was little enthusiasm for it

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<sup>296</sup> NRO, 3085, Scrapbook.

<sup>297</sup> A.J. Heesom, 'The Sunderland By-Election, September 1841', *Northern History*, 9 (1974), pp. 76-77.

<sup>298</sup> *Annual Register* (1868), quoted in Donald C. Richter, *Riotous Victorians* (London, 1981), p. 64.

and it was not particularly effective in ending bribery.<sup>299</sup> It did though have the further impact of formally excluding those without the vote from the designated locations of nomination and polling, whilst quelling some of the speculation and excitement that previously went with election campaigns, restraining what influence the disenfranchised retained over electors.<sup>300</sup> The exclusions impacted most seriously upon working-class women who, unlike men without the vote, could be more easily identified as having no business at polling stations, and more generally 'diminished the din and disorder which had become so much a part of the electoral landscape during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.'<sup>301</sup> The Select Committee of 1876 whose inquiry was restricted to the success of the mechanical working of the machinery provided by the Ballot Act nevertheless heard evidence regarding 'the quietness and orderly manner in which the elections are now carried on. There is no excitement; there is no confusion; anyone walking through the borough would not know that an election was going on. Everything is so perfectly peaceful; there is no declaration of the poll; there is no knowledge how the poll is going on; and, therefore, the excitement is almost entirely done away with.' This despite the witness claiming there had been more interest in the election than had been known for many years.<sup>302</sup> Asquith noted a few years later that after the Ballot Act 'elections were never so orderly. The nomination is scarcely a perceptible event in its own centre or immediate neighbourhood. The polling-day passes off quietly .... In orderliness alone, the gain has been worth anything sacrificed in the way of boldness ....

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<sup>299</sup> K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846-1886* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 259, 608; Bruce L. Kinzer, *The Ballot Question in Nineteenth-Century English Politics* (London, 1982), p. 245. The continuation of election irregularities led to the Corrupt Practices Act being introduced in 1883.

<sup>300</sup> See Vernon, *Politics and the People*, *passim*.

<sup>301</sup> Kinzer, *The Ballot Question*, p. 246.

<sup>302</sup> PP, 1876, xii, *Select Committee Report on Parliamentary and Municipal Elections*, Q. 49, 230, evidence of Sir J. Heron, Town Clerk Manchester. The report did not take evidence from the North East.

The ballot ... is business-like; the old plan was a pompous theatrical display.<sup>303</sup> W.E. Adams, journalist on the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, agreed too that the Ballot Act 'robbed the general election of all its colour and picturesqueness .... An election now is a humdrum affair – tame, featureless, devoid of bustle and animation.'<sup>304</sup>

These accounts underplay the continuity of disorder at elections and the first election after the Ballot Act was passed was marked by scenes of violence.<sup>305</sup> At Durham miners, who were without the vote, flooded polling stations to disrupt the ballots whilst on the street attacked or molested anything or anyone associated with the Tories. This level of disruption was not typical and was largely associated with the organisation of miners through the Durham Miners' Association. When the results were contested by local Conservatives, the resulting by-election passed without incident.<sup>306</sup> The Ballot Act, by removing public nominations (replaced by written nominations), the ritual of hustings and accompanying processions, resulted in the collective event that was an election becoming an increasingly individualistic (male) experience.<sup>307</sup> Women, and those men without the vote, were excluded from the formal activities that the electorate participated in and which dominated press reports. It seems clear though that this does not seem to

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<sup>303</sup> H.H. Asquith, 'The Ballot in England', *Political Science Quarterly*, 4 (1888), p. 664-65.

<sup>304</sup> W.E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, vol. i (London, 1903), p. 251.

<sup>305</sup> *The Times*, 6 February 1874. Most prominent in this account is the rioting at Wolverhampton which was strongly anti-Liberal, but transcended party politics reflecting more the resentment of an 'impoverished and stigmatised Irish minority'; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, p. 93. *The Times* reported that anything bearing Liberal colours was attacked: 'Vehicles and horses and women were assailed, and men who protected the women were beaten.'

<sup>306</sup> Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms*, pp. 95-104.

<sup>307</sup> 'The deluge of appeals from single issue societies such as the United Kingdom Alliance, the Sunday League, the Contagious Diseases Act Repeal Association, the Anti-Vivisection Society, the Open Spaces' Preservation Society and the National Education League, for the electorate to test their candidates on such individual issues and vote accordingly, suggests also the perception that even before the Corrupt Practices Act there was the hope that individual male electors might act rationally based upon principle rather than prejudice or bribery; *The Times*, 2 February 1874. Violent scenes in a few areas across England during the election campaign of November and December 1885 led *The Times*, 27 November 1885, to comment that 'a general election happily does not come every year.'

have dented the participation of working-class women and non-electors in the less formal, and less frequently recorded, election activities. Arthur Elliot, who stood as a candidate at Durham during the 1895 election, canvassed throughout the borough in what was a close fought battle and although he claimed to receive a generally good reception there was 'a good deal of booing from the women and children.'<sup>308</sup>

Although Keir Hardie argued in favour of the enfranchisement of women that men, 'even he of the working classes, will not lightly or all at once part with the authority which has so long been his, and admit that the wife of his bosom is his political equal', there seems often to have been a common perception amongst women that the vote was a family privilege rather one of the individual male only.<sup>309</sup> This is more clearly evident in the early part of this period where, for example, election broadsheets often made reference to the influence females could exert upon voters, some of which claimed to have been written by women. A handbill of 1832 lamented the discouraging news that had reached the north as regards the question of reform and called upon women to set 'a good Example to your Sons' and 'as Mothers, who desire and look forward to the Welfare of your Rising Generation, lend your kind Assistance to promote the Patriotic Intentions of those who are now most dear to you, for the purpose of bringing round a peaceable Change, which will benefit your families, and the People at large.'<sup>310</sup> During the heated and increasingly abusive election at Northumberland during 1826 a 'NORTHUMBERLAND LASS' complained in a handbill that those who were supporting the candidacy of Mr Bell had lost sight

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<sup>308</sup> National Library of Scotland, MS. 19521, Arthur Elliot, Canvass of Durham Diary. Elliot lost the election, after appealing the result, by one vote.

<sup>309</sup> Keir Hardie, 'The Citizenship of Women: A Plea for Woman's Suffrage', in *Review of Reviews*, 18 May 1905.

<sup>310</sup> TWAS, DX 413/1/95, Election Poster, n.d., 1832.



not only of *Politeness* towards *Man*, but of *Courtesy* towards *Woman*. Because we have thought proper to exercise our undoubted Right to smile upon the Candidate that pleases us, we are called *Cooks, Maids-of-all-work, Milliners' Apprentices*, and *old Women*. We are told that our Affections are to be won by *Gleanings out of Novels*; and, in short, there is no Term of Scurrility that these *audacious Caitiffs* do not apply to us. Shall we submit tamely to such Treatment, my dear Sisters, or shall we not shew these vulgar Rebels to our Authority, that we can *frown* as well as *smile*?<sup>311</sup>

The influence of women over their men-folk's choice of candidate at an election first needed those men to have the vote, but as the above quote suggests – through the authors identification with the rhetorical flourish of local 'Lass' – working-class women, like working-class men, were seen able to participate in the election process and that they could have an influence upon the outcome. The perception of influence seems to have continued throughout the period. In 1870 Josephine Butler called upon women to exert their influence upon male relatives at elections, whilst Thomas Burt, MP in a predominantly mining district, spoke of the influence women had upon men with the vote.<sup>312</sup> Canvassers seem to have accepted this influence and the knowledge females had of the voting intentions of male relatives. Canvassers for much of this period were happy to call upon households at times when men were unlikely to be at home and accept the

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<sup>311</sup> NRO, ACC 3085, Scrapbook.

<sup>312</sup> Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth Century England* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 208; Watson, 'Newcastle WLA'.

word of female relatives as to their voting intentions.<sup>313</sup> Canvassing books that record incidents when the voting intention of men were revealed by female relatives can be crosschecked with actual voting in poll books. Although too few of these records have survived to draw any firm conclusions, those that have suggest a great deal of accuracy in the predictions of these women.<sup>314</sup> Sometimes wives were not in unison with their husbands voting intentions leaving canvassers unsure as to how that voter should be marked. One canvasser in reporting on the voting intentions of men at Washington, County Durham, remarked that one man had 'voted for Bell last time and has promised him again but I think we may calculate on one Vote for Ld Howick so far as the Wife *has any say*.'<sup>315</sup>

Not only were canvassers confident that women were privy to the voting decisions of male relatives, but that they could influence this decision and that they had a share in it. The *Primrose League Gazette* argued that canvassers who talked to non-voting wives were not wasting their times as 'the influence of the wives upon the working men with their husbands is unbounded.'<sup>316</sup> The select committee investigations into the events at elections where the result was contested by petition reveal the prominence of women at election times. Not only were women called to give evidence (which considering that the select committees were held at London involved a considerable and costly journey for most), but they were frequently revealed to have accepted bribes in

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<sup>313</sup> Although towards the Edwardian period it became more convenient for a significant amount of the canvassing and electioneering to take place where large groups of voting men were sure to be found such as outside factory gates at the end of work.

<sup>314</sup> See for example the election material from North Northumberland during 1852; NRO, ACC 530/12/1. See also, DCRO, D/ST/C1/16/121, Canvassing Returns for Townships within the Polling District of Barnard Castle, 1832. One problem with this evidence is that it relies upon the diligence of canvassers to write explicit notes concerning having seen a female relative rather than the male voter.

<sup>315</sup> DCRO, D/X 487/10/9, Thomas Crosedale to Henry Smales, 5 April 1826.

<sup>316</sup> *Primrose League Gazette*, 14 July 1888, quoted in Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p. 53.

return for their family vote. Bribery and treating was commonplace: Lord Howick was shocked to find that despite repeatedly ordering his election committee to restrain from any improper expenditure during his 1841 election campaign at Sunderland he was presented with a bill that came to over £5,000.<sup>317</sup> One man who upon describing recent elections at Barnard Castle in 1859 to his brother received a reply commenting that 'you seem to be getting worse in England in your Electioneering, I think, there is more bribery than I ever heard.'<sup>318</sup> The 1859 inquiry into the Small Tenements Act and municipal franchise argued that the new class of voters introduced by this Act 'especially in large towns like Newcastle upon Tyne ... are far less qualified by education, independence, and sobriety, to exercise electoral privileges, than the direct ratepayers ... [At Newcastle] These men, it is said, take no interest unless one merely temporary and selfish.' It went on to report that witnesses to the inquiry 'concur almost unanimously ... that too many of the occupiers of this class of tenement "are open to the highest bidder".'<sup>319</sup> Cornelious O'Leary has suggested that bribery declined over the third-quarter of the nineteenth century; this does not seem to have been the case.<sup>320</sup> Bribery existed on a number of levels from straight cash transactions, offering items of jewellery or clothing, through to the less tangible bribery of treating with beer and refreshments those who had been seen to support the candidate. For example, a broadsheet from the January 1835 election at

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<sup>317</sup> Michael J. Turner, 'Reform Politics and the Sunderland By-Election', p. 86. This figure though signalling that bribery was indulged in was far from the most costly campaign at this time and is dwarfed by the costs at Liverpool in 1830 where one candidate spent £65,000 and another £50,000; quoted in, Michael Rush, *The Role of the Member of Parliament Since 1868. From Gentlemen to Players* (Oxford, 2001), p.86.

<sup>318</sup> DCRO, D/XD 105, Thomas Byers to Henry Byers, 16 August 1859.

<sup>319</sup> PP, 1859, vii, *Select Committee on Rates and Municipal Franchise Acts*, p. iv. W.E. Adams referred to contested elections in the first half of the century as a 'royal time for the mercenary, the corrupt, the creatures without conscience.' Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, p. 256, vol. i.

<sup>320</sup> Cornelious O'Leary, *The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections, 1868-1911* (Oxford, 1962).

Durham City requested 'the LADIES of the Electors who have so honourably supported MR TREVOR ... to partake of TEA' courtesy of the Trevor in celebration of his victory.<sup>321</sup> The select committees were mostly concerned with the most easily identifiable accounts of direct bribery and called upon the female relatives of voters, the wives of publicans, skilled and semi-skilled tradesmen, butchers and other shopkeepers, who they suspected of having been privy to this but also women from the community, servants, charwomen, neighbours, who were knowledgeable of such transactions. The evidence given to the hearing concerning the 1843 Durham City election revealed that money was distributed after voting, but that this was a common occurrence having taken place at many previous elections. Many of the election petitions from elsewhere in the country reveal similar occurrences of frequent bribery.<sup>322</sup> In 1853 a witness from Durham went as far as saying money was plentiful and that 'there were men running about the town with money to give for votes.'<sup>323</sup> Many times the wives of electors represented their husbands at the collection of money, once the poll books had been inspected.<sup>324</sup> William Cobbett, after his election at Oldham in 1832, boasted the unusual manner in which he had fought the seat: 'not one single farthing's worth of victuals or drink was given to anybody for any service whatsoever .... Not a man nor woman in this excellent town attempted to obtain from me either money, drink or any promise to do anything for them in their private concerns'.<sup>325</sup> The select committees confirm Cobbett's

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<sup>321</sup> DCRO, XII 324, Durham Election Broadsheets, 1834-5.

<sup>322</sup> PP, 1843, vi, *Select Committee on the Durham City Election Petition*, Q. 664.

<sup>323</sup> PP, 1852-53, xii, *Select Committee on Durham City Election Petition*, Q. 544.

<sup>324</sup> 1843, SC *Durham City*, Q. 1370-1380.

<sup>325</sup> *Cobbett's Political Register*, 22 December 1832, quoted in Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 230. In a similar exception to standard election practices Joseph Cowen was elected at Newcastle despite refusing to canvass, a system which he claimed was 'contrary to the spirit, if not the letter of the law.' *The Times*, 30 November 1885. Cowen did however have the distinct advantage of owning the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*.

assertion that women were just as likely to request and receive bribes as men and witnesses were often questioned as to whether they had given money to the wives of voters.<sup>326</sup> Some canvassers also attempted to induce voters by bribing other family members: the daughter of Robert Herriot was promised a silk gown for her father's vote.<sup>327</sup> In some cases the husband was approached as to how he would vote and the bribe would then be negotiated with his wife, as was the case at Durham City in 1853 when the wife of John Holliday, who voted Liberal that year, refused to return a sovereign she had been given in return for a promise that her husband would abstain from voting. Holliday had voted Liberal at previous elections and was approached to not vote rather than vote against the Conservative candidate. It seems he had no intention of not voting and connived with his wife to give the intention on polling day that he was attending business outside of Durham City.<sup>328</sup>

These select committees not only sought the evidence of women but accepted that women receiving bribes was an established and accepted practice, albeit a corrupt one. For example, Sarah Nott of Barnstaple, North Devon, was questioned on election bribes:

Q. 16122. Do you know yourself of anything being received for your husband's vote at the last election? – Yes.

Q. 16123. What did you receive? – 6*l*.

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<sup>326</sup> For example, PP, 1852-3, viii, *Select Committee on the Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*, Q. 698-811; PP, 1860, x, *Select Committee on the Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*, Q. 2481-2503.

<sup>327</sup> PP, 1861, xvii, *Select Committee on the Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*, Q. 2803-2828.

<sup>328</sup> 1852-53, *SC Durham City Election Petition*, Q. 1908-2042.

Q. 16124. That of course you applied to the family purposes, and informed your husband of it? – Yes.<sup>329</sup>

Even when both partners were present the wife seems often to have been the recipient of the bribe: 'When you got upstairs what happened? – Well, both my husband and myself sat down on a sofa; there was not many chairs, and he [the party agent] put his hand in his pocket .... and gave me 5l'.<sup>330</sup> The line of questioning taken by the Select Committees also suggests that political differences between husbands and wives was not thought to be uncommon:

Q. 3260. Are you blue, orange, or neither? – My husband is an orange.

Q. 3261. Any family dissension upon that point, or are you an orange too? – No; we have no dissension.

Q. 3262. Are you an orange too? – Yes; I hope I am upon the same principles.<sup>331</sup>

Some of the answers given to these select committees need to be treated with caution. There would often have been a reluctance to give evidence and many witnesses who were called were obstinate in their defence and unwilling to engage with the committee or

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<sup>329</sup> PP, 1854, xxi, *Select Committee on the Barnstaple Election Petition*.

<sup>330</sup> PP, 1864, x, *Select Committee on the Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*, Q. 73-74.

<sup>331</sup> PP, 1837-38, xi, *Select Committee on the Kingston upon Hull Election Petition*.

incriminate themselves in their answers.<sup>332</sup> Witnesses could face intimidation from their community and not only those who were in a position to vote:

Q. 656. You say that the people belonging to both parties have said to you that you are coming to main-swear yourself – I have been told that; I had it thrown in my face twice over.

Q. 657. You told my learned friend that people of both parties had said so? – Yes, both sides.

Q. 658. Neither side likes this inquiry very much, do they? – I believe not.

Q. 659. Is it the freemen and the people of that class that abuse you? – I tell you what, *all classes together*, one with another, Reds and Blues.<sup>333</sup>

Some witnesses refused to speak at all, whilst others such as Ann Knox vehemently denied any knowledge of bribery or suggestions of wrongdoing despite the best efforts of the committees questioning:

Q. 735. You generally disposed of the vote, did not you? – No; I had no vote to give.

Q. 736. But the good man [her husband] had? – Yes.

Q. 737. Did not you generally take charge of the vote? – I took no charge of it.

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<sup>332</sup> It is also the case that witnesses might be bribed prior to giving evidence and some witnesses were questioned as to whom they had spoken with since their arrival to give evidence.

<sup>333</sup> 1843, *SC on Durham City Election Petition*. Emphasis added.

Q. 738. Used they always to deal with you about the vote? – Never; I never took any charge of it. I had no saying upon it; I always left it to his own self.

Q. 739. Do you remember Mr Rankin asking you whether your good man could vote for Mr Forster? – Oh, yes.

Q. 740. Did he offer you a five-pound note, if he would? – No.

Q. 741. Nothing of the sort? – No.

Q. 742. Did he not promise you should have 5*l.* if he voted for Mr Forster? – No.

Q. 743. What? – No, I could not answer that.<sup>334</sup>

The perks of elections and the handouts given to voters and the poor alike by candidates were valued and witnesses seemed reluctant to risk being alienated from future benefits. Many viewed handouts from candidates as a right and were confident of receiving promised monies. There were certainly thronging crowds wherever money was being distributed. One man at Durham had been encouraged by his sister, who was working at the public house she and her husband owned, to attend at the Wheatsheaf where money was being handed out, despite being ineligible to vote himself, in case it could be paid out to him on behalf of her husband. She seems right to have done so as he received a sovereign after reporting that his sister had authorized him to collect it. He returned the sovereign to her.<sup>335</sup> At the same election one witness in his evidence to the Select Committee, on the 1843 Durham City election, complained that he had received no

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<sup>334</sup> 1852-3, *SC on Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*.

<sup>335</sup> 1843, *SC on Durham City Election Petition*, Q. 1004-1113.



money even though he had not voted. He felt he should have been given something as he generally voted 'on that side' for Lord Dungannon and thought his treatment 'rather shabby'.<sup>336</sup> Whilst women could enjoy the perks of elections, with payments being made to families who assisted as messengers and flag bearers as well as directly in exchange for votes, they could also suffer recriminations from angry election managers. Sarah Allan gave evidence to the 1860 Select Committee on the Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition and despite claiming to know nothing of her husband receiving money (supposedly ten shillings and a watch) was nevertheless subject to an attack from Mr Knox, a party manager. Knox attended the Allan household shortly after polling when it became clear Allan had not voted as Knox had anticipated and in an argument with Sarah attempted to strike her, and would have succeeded had her brother-in-law not stepped in.<sup>337</sup> Scenes such as these were likely to have been played out across the country. Although it could be argued that bribes may have been frequently given to women instead of directly to the male voters as a means of circumventing charges of bribery, the number of female witnesses to select committees would quickly have dispelled this myth, whilst leaving unsolved the question of why so many women were approached independently of their husbands and the common perception that the male electorate shared the vote with their closest female relatives.

Similar evidence of the place of women in bribery claims from the latter part of this period are virtually non-existent for this region. This in part is due to the extension of the franchise. The legislative changes of 1867-8 served to move the location of bribery more firmly away from the home and to areas where large groups could

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<sup>336</sup> 1843, *SC on Durham City Election Petition*, Q. 748-750.

<sup>337</sup> 1860, *SC on Berwick upon Tweed Election Petition*, Q. 4696-4700.

congregate after the normal hours of work. Individual bribery was replaced mostly by large scale treating, which may well have included women at points but were mostly concentrated at the most conspicuously male dominated locations. Increasingly male only Conservative, Liberal and Union organised clubs (as well as the associations such as the Primrose League described above) played an important role in influencing voters. It was little coincidence that these clubs were almost universally fully licensed and they served to act as a hub of sociability and watered down political indoctrination. A letter to the *Newcastle Daily Journal*, protested that the 'amateur public house' that was the Newcastle Liberal Club should find it necessary to sell alcohol, 'to the tune of nearly £500 per annum', and worse still that this institution was supported by Liberal temperance campaigners such as Lady Carlisle.<sup>338</sup> Previously candidates had indulged their constituents between elections primarily through donations to local charitable bodies, occasional distributions of food and beer, and attending local functions, but now it could be remarked that 'clubs are trumps'.<sup>339</sup>

The role of employers in influencing the voting behaviour of the electorate was also important and was primarily a male affair. Nossiter has described the role of industrial influence, as opposed to landed interest, from 1868. Although one should be careful in positing too sharp a shift coinciding with reform it is certainly the case that industrial connections had a strong influence in the region, although not an

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<sup>338</sup> TWAS, D/X 1106/1/3, Newspaper Cuttings Scrapbook, 1891-1900.

<sup>339</sup> William Robson to his wife, 8 October 1898, cited in George Williams Keeton, *A Liberal Attorney-General. Being the Life of Lord Robson of Jesmond, 1852-1918* (London, 1949), p. 82. On the role of socializing and party clubs see, John A. Garrard, 'Parties, Members and Voters After 1867: A Local Study', *The Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), pp. 145-63; H.J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management. Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Sussex, 1978), pp. 103-9; Christopher Stevens, 'The Conservative Club Movement in the Industrial West Riding, 1880-1914', *Northern History*, 38 (2001), pp. 121-43; Jon Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 629-52; and, Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society, and Politics. The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (London, 1982).

insurmountable one. The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* commented on the Liberal candidate at Tynemouth in 1868 whose 'intimate business relations with the shipping interest leave his political antagonists no foothold for opposition .... Too much is sometimes made of mere local knowledge and commercial connections, but it cannot be disputed that they often exert a powerful influence upon the fortunes of candidates .... Happily in this region the Liberal candidate is invulnerable.'<sup>340</sup>

The impact of these changes would seem to have resulted in working-class women being unable to lay claim to bribes in the way women had previously. However, bribery continued unabated, even after the Corrupt Practices Act, and perhaps the most prominent reason why official evidence dries up is because of the effect of the Parliamentary Elections Act of 1868. This removed the select committee inquiries and replaced them by special election courts. These courts were held in the locality of the petition, instead of in London, and should have made gathering evidence easier. They did not and the courts proved to be prohibitively expensive in most instances. Whilst, as in the earlier period, the worst cases of corruption continued to be kept hidden the incentive to do so was raised as the fear that the constituency might be disfranchised replaced the hope of petitioners that the seat may be contested again through a by-election.<sup>341</sup> Where special election courts did convene bitter feeling was 'exhibited in every variety of form, such as people refusing absolutely to trade with men because they are of different politics and ladies refusing to speak to each other, and even to their own

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<sup>340</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 16 June 1868; Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms*, pp. 79-94. Jon Lawrence describes the defeat of a local employer who stood for the Tories at South Shields in 1900, although perhaps underestimates the strength of Liberal politics, aided by alliances with Labour, in the region. For example, the ILP did not run a candidate against him and the Marsden Branch of the DMA painted his portrait on a banner used in ceremonial processions through the town; Keeton, *A Liberal Attorney-General*, p. 80; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, p. 165.

<sup>341</sup> Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, p. 262.

sisters in the street.<sup>342</sup> The records from these courts are fairly basic and do not record the proceedings in anywhere near the same amount of detail as the select committee reports. Only the occasional case reveals incidences – but not the detail – of the bribery of females, although presumably where the provision of teas, dances and entertainments were concerned a number of females would have benefited.<sup>343</sup> In any case, the perception of criminal activity associated with the courts increased further the reluctance of potential witnesses to attend and raised the concern that 'breaches of the electoral law were a species of crime, and that they would be investigated as carefully as any other form of crime.'<sup>344</sup> Increasingly, petitions relating to bribery and intimidation were replaced by petitions to the election courts restricted in their nature to technical details and the recount of votes in close fought elections.<sup>345</sup> Although O'Leary recognises the reduction in election petitions cannot be seen as reflecting an extension of bribery, his wider conclusions as to the extent to which bribery ceased would seem to be overly optimistic.

This section has sought to emphasise the interest and participation of working-class women at elections. Although effected by changes in the electoral system they continued to play an albeit narrowing role in electoral politics in a similar manner as they had done at the start of the century. Whilst 'street politics' remained an almost exclusively male domain, politics on the street did not.

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<sup>342</sup> PP, 1875, viii, *Select Committee on Corrupt Practices Prevention and Election Petitions Acts*, Minutes of Evidence, Q. 204-28.

<sup>343</sup> See for example, NA, J 104/306, Darlington Borough North Ward: Race, G. and Ors. v. Wilkes, J.J., 1878; J 104/181, Northumberland County-Hexham Division: Hudspith, W. and Anor. v. Clayton, N., 1892.

<sup>344</sup> Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, p. 274.

<sup>345</sup> In some cases the courts did not settle allegations of bribery and concentrated on other aspects of the petition such as intimidation, as was the case in North Durham when the petition regarding the election of 1874 was heard. See evidence of Mr Hoskins, 1875, *SC on Corrupt Practices*, Minutes of Evidence, Q. 2066-75.

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## CONCLUSION

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Women at all levels of society were interested and involved in politics throughout this period, as they had been during the eighteenth century and earlier, although to differing degrees depending on what definition of 'politics' is taken. In a sardonic passage of her semi-fictionalised account of late eighteenth century Newcastle, Jane Harvey produces an account of a political discussion between the well-to-do local elite:

How does the War go on? said Louisa.

Women have no business with politics, I think – said Edmond, – setting down his tea-cup, and smiling at Louisa.

Think again Edmond (said the Parson) and you will surely think better; a female politician, is, I grant, an odious character, but certainly every Lady should be so far versed in the affairs of Europe as to understand the contents of a newspaper; and I hope *you*, will never chuse a wife for whom you must blush every time she opens her lips in company.

Poor Edmond! The laugh turned against him, but was he quite wrong? The tea-table was removed, but Mr Brookly and the Parson having taken up the subject of politics, like true Englishmen, could not let it drop again. – Mrs Brookly, Louisa, Edmond, and my brother, had engaged in a party at whist, and I took up a book which lay near me'.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Jane Harvey, *A Sentimental Tour Through Newcastle, By a Young Lady* (Newcastle, 1794), p. 18.

Men may have dominated political discussion (and the historical record) but this was not to the exclusion or interest of women. Working-class women were often motivated to engage in public and political action or events through an empathy with the suffering of others or in defence of their family and community. Whilst the period before the second Reform Act has sometimes been told as a series of defeats for female involvement in politics, this view only really holds if one takes the involvement of a small number of aristocratic women at the Westminster election of 1784 as a highpoint; it is perhaps the period after the second Reform Act which this charge could be levelled at. It is not enough though to list the economic and social hurdles of domestic duties and gender roles that stood in the way of the politicisation of working-class women and conclude, as Stenberg has, that 'what is surprising is not that most working-class women remained indifferent to politics, but that quite a few managed to pull it [political involvement] off at all.'<sup>347</sup> Despite the advances made by the suffrage movement and the flowering of opportunities for a number of middle-class women, the place of working-class women in 'formal' politics seems to have been narrowing. There was much continuity in roles, but the changing nature of party management and elections served mostly to make politics for the vast majority of women less accessible.

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<sup>347</sup> Kim Yoonok Stenberg, 'Working-Class Women in London Local Politics, 1894-1914', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9 (1998), p. 326.

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## CONCLUSION

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...'You think then that, as far as the drunkards are concerned, a rise of wages would have led to more being spent in drink than the shortening of the day will do; eh, Dan?', queried his wife.

'Very well put, missus; that's just what I do think,' he answered, smiling.

'Oh, you men think we women don't understand these sort of things,' said the wife, in a half bantering tone, 'but we do; don't we, Mrs Robinson?'

'Of course we do,' answered the latter, 'when we hear them properly talked over, like this.'

'I'll tell you one thing in connection with this matter that you two women understand, but that some women don't understand,' said Robinson; 'and that is, that, to a great extent, it lies with the wives whether the nine hours' day is the good thing for working men that it ought to be, and can be made. When I got home on the evening of our first day under the new system,' he went on, turning to his wife with a beaming face, 'you had a cheery fire, a bright fire-side, the tea-pot hissing on the hob, a nice plate of hot toast all ready, the table set, yourself nicely dressed, and with a smile of welcome on your face. I only said at the time, "This is Pleasant!" but I thought a good deal about it, and I thought, among other things, if any employer could only come and see this picture, he wouldn't begrudge giving the nine hours.'

Thomas Wright ("The Journeyman Engineer"), "The Nine Hour  
Movement (is it a Curse or a Blessing?)"<sup>1</sup>

The political activities of women in nineteenth-century England have been particularly well documented by historians in the last few decades. The rich diversity of female roles, actions and representations evident within this period have been discussed in-depth and the arguments are well rehearsed. There are many studies that offer highly illuminating insights into the activities of some women in some areas during this period but follow closely the chronology of traditional male political narratives. Whilst recognising the complex nationwide picture, these studies have often positioned their results within an accepted framework of events, whilst suggesting that regional developments elsewhere may not fit such a pattern, and that the story of female involvement in politics does not unfold neatly. The intention of this study has not been to question the value of such investigations, but to provide a case study of a region that did not fit the pattern of female experiences in areas that are over-represented in historical discussion, such as Lancashire, Yorkshire, or London. As the quote which opens this conclusion implies, political discourse in general rarely appealed directly to working-class women as political agents in their own right. We should not then expect that their involvement in political activities should necessarily mirror those of working-class men, or that an experience of similar employment to men was necessary to their politicisation. Nor should we expect that the suffrage movement, predominantly middle-class in origin and focus, was intrinsically attractive to working-class women. Although the wealth of evidence that is available to the historian regarding female employment and political activity in areas such as Preston

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<sup>1</sup> *The British Workman*, July 1872, pp. 122-23.



and Manchester makes them appealing sites of study, this evidence may actually serve to distract from other forms of experience that are less well recorded; much can be missed if the focus is not spread wider. It must also be remembered that these areas were not necessarily representative of the wider region they were situated within nor can they stand for the experience of working-class women in England as a whole. Conversely, this study does not claim that the North East, as an almost extreme opposite to those areas, can be made to stand for the experiences of working-class women as a whole across England in this period. The changes that occurred in this period, in employment and population, differed not only between regions but within them, and that although the North East was typified by contemporaries as being a large farm to the north and a large coalfield to the south, this disguises as much as it illuminates. This study has sought to outline the changes that occurred in some detail, not only because of the impact they had upon the choices and decisions that could be made by working-class men and women at this time, but because of the bleak picture it seems to paint of the opportunities available to women. Advancements in the industrial structure of the North East were almost solely to the benefit of male workers, the average age of marriage for females were amongst the very youngest nationwide and the percentage married amongst the very highest. It is surely no coincidence that in Christina Rossetti's novella *Commonplace* the coarse and vulgar businessman whom Jane Charlmont marries for his wealth (in contrast to the stout independence of her sister) is associated with the North East in name – Mr Durham – and in his previous marriage to a Lady of Newcastle who is described as a 'Leigh of the Leazes'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Commonplace, and Other Short Stories* (London, 1870). Christina Rossetti was acquainted with William Bell Scott, the Trevellys, and the Spence Watsons, and visited the North East on

It has been the implicit argument throughout that much can be gained from studying this region and that this thesis brings a greater balance to our understanding of working-class women. The experience of the 'average' working-class woman was certainly, I would argue, no further removed from that which has been described here as that which was experienced in those areas with very prominent female employment. Whilst many working-class women worked at some point during their lives, most did not expect to work for the whole of their lives; as Vickery has pointed out in relation to propertied women, hard paid labour was not intrinsically empowering.<sup>3</sup> Map 1.3 reveals how few areas could boast high regular female employment levels and although the North East was clearly a region with low female employment, it was not drastically out of step with the national picture as a whole. The census has been much maligned by historians of female employment and I have not sought to disguise that, as a record of actual employment, it has many faults. It is more accurate as a record of *regular* employment. More importantly, with a careful adjustment of the census figures, that reflects the changing methods of recording employment and local contexts, we can more confidently ascertain trends and peculiarities between localities and regions. In the North East, it is clear that levels of recorded employment were low, but also that they remained relatively static for much of this period. This cannot be attributed to mis-recording alone and indeed the figures seem to correlate closely to the high proclivity towards early marriage, especially in areas of high male wages. Even in those places where some employment may have been available it did not necessarily make sense for women to do so.

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a number of occasions.

<sup>3</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 1998), p. 2.

As we have seen, working-class women were able to exert much control over their lives. Their role in managing the economy of the household was one that often conflicted with paid employment; but, it was one that was vital in ensuring their family remained out of poverty. In times of hardship there were options – albeit limited ones – open to these women other than undertaking low-paid employment, which was frequently the less rational choice that could be made. Paid employment for working-class women was not a gateway to independence but a concession to survival, and one that frequently came with the added burden of paying for child care and was undertaken in addition to domestic chores. In times of hardship, applications to charitable organisations would often prove less disruptive and more effective in relieving poverty, as might resorting to petty theft. These were not effortless alternatives, and the precarious existence of married women during times of hardship is reflected in their overrepresentation in the crime figures. Some of these women may have been abandoned; others undertook criminal acts of subsistence on behalf of their families, not wishing to risk their husband, the primary breadwinner, being arrested. The figures relating to prostitutes are more complicated and are dependant upon how vigorously prostitution was tackled by individual police forces. From the available records it appears that prostitutes were on average older and more likely to be married than might have been expected; it is also clear, despite low levels of female employment, that in regards to the numbers engaged, prostitution was not regarded as a problem in the region. The number of prostitutes identified as having being born within the region, as well as their older age, suggests the economic vulnerability of these women. Unlike those areas, such as Plymouth and York, renowned for their high levels of prostitution, this activity seems not to have been as

economically attractive in this region, and that prostitution was a last resort of indigenous older women, unable to secure other forms of employment. It was, of course, not an option open to women in the more rural areas of the region.

If this has painted a miserable picture of female opportunities, the relatively small number of working-class women undertaking paid employment was not to the detriment of their politicisation. Politicisation occurred in many ways, at different times, but always mediated through lived experience and expectation. The politicisation of working-class women through their experience of employment, and their subsequent attachment to formal politics, is only one such example; but it is one that has frequently come to represent the experiences of working-class women in general. The limited 'formal' politicisation of working-class women described in Chapter Five was not, it has been argued, indicative of their politicisation as a whole. Recent work on middle-class women has expanded the manner in which we conceive what constituted their political space. The 'private' realm of friendship and family connections has been stressed as a site where political ideas could and were debated.<sup>4</sup> This study has attempted to further our understanding of working-class political space and politicisation beyond an involvement in the formal political structures of the nineteenth century that reflect subsequent developments in the political system during the twentieth century. If we are to talk of the avenues and opportunities of political expression open to women we must also provide an account beyond that of those exceptional women who were forefront in the feminist movement or women's political organisations. That is not to say that such studies are not important, but rather that by focusing upon a minority of extraordinary women, much of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example the essays in, Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power*; and, Gleadle and Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics*.

the political culture of the nineteenth century, as it was lived, can be missed. This thesis has not argued that the most prominent of the political activities undertaken by working-class women in the North East achieved more than was possible elsewhere, or that those women who were active were more committed and their reach and impact was more extensive. This would have been unusual in a region that was widely renowned for heavy industry and coal mining, as well as its unusual sex-ratio and high rates of marriage. Rather, it has argued that working-class women were a significant part of the texture of nineteenth-century politics, a texture that can be obscured by an examination of isolated cases and the actions – no matter how important – of a minority of women. It has not been thought necessary to argue that working-class women in this region achieved more than they did in their political action; their achievements undoubtedly pale in comparison to the efforts and success of women elsewhere in England. What this study has tried to capture is the manner in which women were involved in general political activities, beyond the types of formal political participation that dominate historical discussion, and shows there was much continuation of older forms of political engagement. These older forms of political participation were increasingly marginalised over the second half of the nineteenth century, in tandem with the increasing professionalism of politics. Although opportunities opened up for middle-class women to actively engage in political activities in associations such as the Primrose League, changes in the organisation of politics also served to narrow the opportunities for the most popular and public participation of working-class women, although these did continue throughout the period. Even though overtly political organisations had limited success in appealing to working-class women in the North East, working-class women were still politicised, though like many working-

class men this did not centre upon formal politics, but the politics of community and tradition: the formal politics of this period did not always coincide with the politicisation of working-class men and women. The lack of support for the suffrage movement and Women's Labour League should not blind us to the political activities working-class women enjoyed.

This work has challenged a number of accepted interpretations of the history of women in this period, through an analysis of a region that has been widely neglected by historians of gender. Studies of women's history have recently sought to emphasize the possibilities of female agency within this period, but in doing so have examined sources from subjects that might be best described as 'special cases', such as Lancashire cotton workers and the political networks of a handful of women. Such evidence is inapplicable to the majority of women in the nineteenth century. This study has examined women with seemingly no claim to such agency. With low employment and high rates of marriage and an avowedly male culture, if anywhere women were to be powerless it was here. Yet, as this study has shown, working-class women in the North East were active constituents of local culture and politics, although often through different means, and with alternative motives than has been claimed for other unrepresentative localities. By refocusing away from the most prominent and public activities of working-class women in this period we can see the more common ways in which females perceived their own role and stood alongside their men-folk as political actors within their communities.

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## APPENDIX: ADDRESSES, SONGS AND POEMS

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### The Pawnshop Bleezing

Wor Sall was kaimin' oot her hair,  
An' aw was turnin' dosy,  
Whiles snot rin' in wor easy chair,  
That makes a chep sleep cosy,  
When frae the street cam screams n' cries –  
Wor Sall says 'Wheest!' – aw rubs my eyes  
An' marcy! shoots o' "Fire!" aw hears –  
Aw myeks yen lowp doon a' the stairs,  
An' smash, aw seed a queerish seet,  
Yel thousands crooded i' the Street –  
It was the Pawnshop bleezin'.

The wimmen folks 'twas sair to see,  
Lamentin' their distresses;  
For mony a goon, an' white shemee,  
Was burnt wi' bairn's dresses;  
Peg Putty stamp'd an' cried, "Oh, dear,  
Wor Geordey's breeks is gyen, aw fear;  
Maw bonny shawl an' Bella's frock –"  
Says Betty Mills, "An' there's wor clock,  
An' a' maw bits o' laddies' claes –  
My pillowslips an' pair o' stays –  
Is in the Pawnshop bleezin'."

A dowpy wife wi' *borrow'd fat*,  
An' wiv a puggy beak, man,  
Cam pushin' wiv her bonnet flat,

And puffin oot her cheeks, man;  
Ye niver seed such bullet eyes –  
Her screams aw thowt wad splet the skies;  
"Oh Lord! maw babbie's things is gyen!  
Maw unborn babe has claes noon yen!  
An' when wor Billy finds it oot,  
There'll murder be, aw hae nee doo;  
Oh dear! what garr'd me put them in?  
'Twas a' the races an' curs'd gin –  
That set my claes a-bleezin."

"Oh, marcy, aw'll be hammer'd tee!'  
Cries Orange Jinny, blairin';  
'Aw popp'd Ned's suit te haw a spree,  
But suen aw'll get me fairin', –  
He thinks, poor sowl, his class is reet,  
He'll want yen suit o'Firday neet –  
What mun aw dee? aw wadent care,  
But, hinnies, watch an' seal is there;  
An' warse an' warse! he'll quickly know,  
That earrings, weddin' ring an' a'  
Is in the Pawnshop bleezin'!"

Lang Skipper Jack, wi' mony a sweer,  
Cam laingerin up the Side, man,  
Says, he, "What's a' the matter, here?  
Noo, here's a bonny tide, man!  
Why, marrows, sure it cannit be,  
This is'nt Trotter's place aw see?"  
So oot his baccy fob he tuik,  
Hawled oot some *tickets* frae a buik:



"Why sink the sowls of a' the lot;  
Aye, d—n the yel scrape's gyen to pot,  
There's a maw fortin bleezin'!"

The yells, an' blairs, an' curses lood,  
And cries o' stupefaction:  
An' bits o' bairns amang the crood,  
Increased the mad distraction;  
Aye, mony a wife will rue the day  
She put her husband's things away;  
An' men will groan wi' bitter grief,  
(For Pawnshop law hes ne relief,) –  
To find their labour, toil, an' pain,  
To 'pear like decent foaks is vain –  
*There a' their goods is bleezin'!*

The world was better far aw'msure,  
When Pawnshops had ne neym, man;  
When poor folks could their breed procure,  
Without a *deed o' sheym*, man!  
Thor Boxes luik like cuddies' stalls;  
There's hell-fire in thor hollow balls;  
Their gains is large, wor chance is sma' –  
They often get wor pledge's a' –  
Just like the plagues ov Egypt sent,  
They banish peace an' calm content –  
Aw wish they a' were bleezin'.

J.P. Robson, published in *A Choice Collection of Tyneside Songs by Wilson, Corvan, Mitford, Gilchrist, Robson, Harrison, Emery, Ridley, Oliver, Shield, & C* (Newcastle, 1873).

### **She's Sumboddy's Bairn**

One dark, dorty neet, as aw myed me way hyem,  
Aw pas'd a bit lassie se bonny,  
She belanged tiv a class that aw'm frightened to nyem,  
An' aw grieve that wor toon hes se monny.  
She'd dress'd hersel' up in extravagant style,  
Wi' satins an' laces upon her;  
As she passed me her fyece had a strange sort o' smile,  
That gliff'd me, it did, on my honour.

Aw thowt, noo, that's sumboddy's bairn.

Aw wis struck bi her youth an' her bonny white skin,  
An' the bloom on her cheek tho' twas painted,  
As it flash'd on me mind, them's the trappin's o' sin,  
Oh, aw felt, aye, as if aw cud fainted.  
Aw saw bi her walk ,an' her heed toss'd se high.  
An' her airtful-lke manner so winnin',  
Bi her ower-dressed style, an' the glance ov her eye,  
That she'd myed, oh, that awful beginnin':

An' aw thowt, noo, she's someboddy's bairn.

O, lasses, remember yor feythers at hyem,  
An' yor muthers, whe's hearts ye are breakin',  
An' the bruthors an' sisters yor bringin' te shyem,  
An' the awful-like future yor muekin;  
Divvent hanker for plissure nor dresses se fine,  
Nor be tempted bi flashin' an' beauty;  
Think twice ere ye start on that dreadful decline  
That leads ye fre' virtue and duty.

Remember, yor sumboddy's bairn.

Ye lads that a muther hes fondled an' nurs'd,  
That hes sisters that's gentle an' pure,  
Nivver lead a young lass in the way that's accurs'd,  
Nivver breathe in her ear what's impure.  
Reyther try to protect her fre' danger an' harm,  
And if wranged, see the injured one righted;  
For life hes been robb'd of its lovliets charm,  
When a woman's fair fame hes been blighted.  
For mind, she wis sumboddy's bairn.

J. Horsley, n.d. c. 1880, TWAS, 1074/228.

### **The New Keel Row**

Whe's like my Johnny,  
Sae leish, sae blithe, sae bonny,  
He's foremost 'mang the mony  
Keel lads o' Coaly Tyne;  
He'll set or row so tightly,  
Or in the dance so sprightly,  
He'll cut and shuffle slightly.  
'Tis true – were he not mine.

Well may the kell row,  
The Keel row, the keel row,  
Weel may the keel row,  
That my laddie's in:  
He wears a blue bonnet,

A Dimple in his chin.

He's ne mair learning,  
Than tells his weekly earning,  
Yet reet frae wrang discerning,  
Tho' brave, ne bruiser he;  
Tho' he no worth a plack is,  
His awn coat on his back is,  
And nane can say that black is  
The white o' Johnny's ee.

Each pay-day nearly,  
He takes his quairt right dearly,  
Then talks O, latin O, – cheerly,  
Or mavies jaws away,  
How caring not a feather,  
Nelson and he together,  
The springy French did lether,  
And gar'd them shab away.

Were a' kings comparely,  
In each I'd spy a fairly,  
An'ay wad Johnny barly,  
He gets sic bonny bairns;  
Go bon, the queen, or misses,  
Bud wad for Johnny's kisses,  
Luik upon as blisses,  
Scrimp meals, caff beds, and dairns.

Wour lads, like their deddy,  
To fight the French are ready,

But gie's a peace that's steady,  
And breed cheap as lang syne;  
May a' the press gangs perish,  
Each lass her lady cherish:  
Lang may the Coal Trade flourish  
Upon the dingy Tyne.

Breet star o' Heaton,  
Your ay wour darling sweet'en,  
May blessings leet on  
Your leady, bairns, and ye;

God bless the King and Nation.  
Each bravely fill his station,  
Our canny *Corporation*,  
Lang may they sing wi' me,

Weel may the keel row, &c.

By T.T., published in John Bell (ed.), *Rhymes of Northern Bards: Being a Curious Collection of Old and New Songs and Poems, Peculiar to the Counties of Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland and Durham* (Newcastle, 1812).

**The Newcassel Fishwives** (Tune "The Bonnie Keel Laddie.")

Ma hinnies! Aa's oney a fishwife,  
As's sell'd fish mony a year;  
An' aa's seed a few changes o' this life  
I' wor canny aad toon, as ye'll hear.

A awes born I' the law end o' Sandgyet,  
That bonny bit pleyce doon the Quay;  
Ef aa's aad, aa's byeth hearty an' strang yet,  
Aa's a Newcassel fishwife, ye see!

When a lass, aa wad gan wi' ma muthor  
Te the Fish Market on the Sandhill;  
At wor stall we'd fresh fish, an' ne othor,  
Not yor trawler stuff, white i' the gill.  
Aall wor Quayside merchants i' them days  
Wad cum te the market quite free,  
An' buy aall their fish thor elways  
Fra the Newcassel fishwives, ye see!

Amang the fishwives wes some beauties,  
As smairt like as ivvor ye saw;  
Te their gude-men they aye did thor duties  
When the press-gang tyuck them off te the war.  
Yen day they copped aad Billy Korton  
An' they tarred an' they feathered him tee;  
And they chased the poor sowl wi' ne shart on,  
These Newcassel fishwives, ye see!

Sometimes i' the market they'd faal oot,  
An' at one another wad yell;  
Then for the aad keeper they'd baal out:  
His nyem it was Horney Tom Kell.  
An' then thor wes poor Willy Elly,  
That aall the wives' errands wad de;  
Aboot him sum queer things aa could tell ye –  
Aa's a Newcassel fishwife, ye see!

But, hinnies! they're aall deed an' gyen noo!  
These fishwives that aa used to knaa;  
Such as them aa's sure thor is nyen noo.  
Like Euffy Scott an' poor Hannah Gallaw.  
Lady Forster an' brave Nancy Darling,  
An' Mrs. Teasdale – ivory day they wad be  
I' the aad Custom House, if ye'd call in –  
They wor Newcassel fishwives, ye see!

An' since wor aad market's been shut up,  
We've been bothered sair ivory way;  
Iv a pleyce i' the Close we wor put up,  
Till wor trade's varry nigh gyen away.  
But a bonny new market we've got noo;  
Wive aad Nep an' twe fishwives – aall three  
Cataching cad o' the top an' what not noo!  
For the Newcassel fishwives, ye see!

Published in Matt C. James (ed.), *Sum Tyneside Sangs: A Collection of Prize Songs &c in the Tyneside Dialect* (Newcastle, 1898). This song was originally published in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 1880.

### **A Corn Law Rhyme: By a Lady**

Patriot Britons! ye whose zeal  
Oft haft striv'n for England's weal,  
Raise your banner! cry "Repeal  
Of Monopoly."

Now's the day and now's the hour,  
See the front of battle lower,  
See approach proud Faction's power,  
Famine! Slavery!

Who would cherish Trade's worst bane?  
Who keep up the price of grain  
Mocking at our millions slain?  
Recreant, let him flee!

Who will pledge his spirit's might,  
In a holy, bloodless fight,  
To assert a nation's right,  
Join our company!

By oppression's deep'ning woes,  
Hopes that early tombs enclose,  
We will brave a thousand foes,  
But Trade shall be free!

Lay the inhuman Corn Law low,  
Heav'n and earth's unmasked foe,  
Liberty's in every blow  
That brings Victory!

M.P.



**A Corn Law Rhyme: By a Lady**

Why do we mourn our deluged plain,  
    The harvest's ruined spoil,  
Our clouded skies that oft refuse  
    To bless the farmer's toil?

Why ache our hearts at tales of woe,  
    Of Want, with hollow eye,  
That stalks amid our thronging streets,  
    And of Childhood's misery?

He who still satisfies the cry  
    Of the raven's hungry brood,  
And guides the lion to his prey  
    In the forest's solitude.

'Tis not His will who the meanest things  
    Doth in His mercy feed,  
That of His *human* family,  
    Should *any* suffer need.

If cold our suns, and bleak our soil,  
    Hath not His bounty spread  
Plenty o'er many a smiling land,  
    To give His children bread?

Where the Red Indian roam'd of old,  
    In the depth of solemn woods,  
And flows, 'mid shade of giant trees,  
    The "Father of the floods" –

The British exile guides his plough, –  
    O'er th' atlantic's swell,  
Driven forth by Want, stern child of Law,  
    Far in the wilds to dwell.

To wield the ringing axe, to clear  
    The wood-encumbered ground, –  
But Peace, beneath his log-built hut,  
    And Plenty he hath found.

Would not his patriot heart rejoice  
    That of his harvest stores,  
Freely should those he left, partake  
    Even at the cottage doors?

If, food to seek, we journey forth  
    Like the Patriarchs of old,  
And men of foreign mien and speech,  
    Enrich with England's gold, –

He who *their* wants supplied, revealed  
    A long-lost brother's face,  
And thus may we our brethren find,  
    In all the human race.

The glorious ocean rolls between,  
    Glittering, and broad, and free,  
A highway for the nations  
    Hath God made that circling sea!

Then haste to build the stately bark,  
    And spread the swelling sail,  
Unfurled by many a sinewy arm,  
    To catch the favouring gale,  
  
And bring from far the precious freight,  
    The staff that life sustains,  
Then thousand famished lips shall pour  
    Thanksgiving's joyful strains,  
  
To Him who feeds the meanest things,  
    And hath in bounty spread  
Plenty o'er many a smiling land  
    To give His children bread!

J.R.

Published in *Corn Law Rhymes*, NCL, L.337.

### **The Colliery Union**

Come all ye noble Colliery Lads,  
Where'er you belong,  
I pray you give attention  
And you shall hear my song,  
'Tis concerning of our Union Lads  
For they have pro'd so true,  
They have stood fast, man to man,  
We must give them their due,

Chorus:        So stick unto your Union,  
                 And mind what Roberts say,  
                 If you will be guided by his word,  
                 You'll surely win the day.

Little did the Masters think,  
That you would stand so fast,  
They thought that hunger it would bite,  
You would give up at last;  
But like the widow's Cruise of Meal,  
That never did run out,  
The Lord did send them fresh supplies,  
That served them round about.

The Masters they devised a plan,  
Their Union for to break,  
It only made the Colliery Lads  
The firmer for to stick;  
For when they thought upon the time  
That they'd been bit before.  
Before that they would go to work,  
They would beg from door to door.

Then for to get the pits to work  
They have tried every plan,  
Both Scotch and Irish they have brought,  
And every Countryman;  
But all the Coals that they have got  
Have cost them double pay,  
Cheer up your hearts, ye Colliery Lad

You're sure to win the day.

Success to your commander,  
And Roberts is his name,  
Since he has prov'd so loyal,  
We'll spread about his fame;  
Cheer up your hearts, ye Colliery Lads,  
He'll not leave you alone,  
After he has eat the meat,  
He will give them the bone.

Let's not forget young Beesley,  
A man of wit possessed,  
He's gain'd the Country's favour,  
For he has stood the test;  
And let your day be e'er so dull,  
You'll see the rising sun,  
For they will gain your victory  
Without either sword or gun.

Elizabeth Gair, colliers wife, published in NCL, L. 331.89, *Pitmen's Strike Scrapbook*,  
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